



Student Performance Q&A: 2015 AP[®] Human Geography Free-Response Questions

The following comments on the 2015 free-response questions for AP[®] Human Geography were written by the Chief Reader, Don Zeigler of Old Dominion University. 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?

Students were asked to (A) identify an important phenomenon (gerrymandering) that is both geographical and political, (B) explain the relationship between redistricting and the U.S. Census, and (C) identify and discuss political consequences that could result from redistricting. “Gerrymandering” is mentioned by name in Part IV of the Course Outline. Likewise, “census data” is mentioned by name in Part I and, by extension, in Part II, which calls attention to implications of various population distributions. Students, therefore, should have been well prepared to provide a complete answer to this question. The best answers required some degree of synthesis and would have drawn from three different parts of the course outline (Parts I, II, and IV). By focusing on redistricting and gerrymandering, this question asked students to think critically about one of the foundation stones of democracy as it is practiced in the United States.

How well did students perform on this question?

The mean score on this question was 2.15 out of a total of 7 points. More students failed to score any points on this question than either of the other two FRQs. About 30 percent received a 0 or did not try to answer the question. Although only about 3 percent received a full 7 points, about 19 percent scored in the 5-6 point range. Part A required a simple identification, and most students picked up the point by citing “gerrymandering;” other terms on the rubric were rarely used. Part B required an explanation of a relationship. In general, students earned either 0 points or 2 points; they either understood the relationship or they did not have even a basic understanding. Part C required higher-level analysis. Students had to “think forward” to the consequences of gerrymandering. Most points in Part C were found in C1 and C3.

What were common student errors or omissions?

Many students seemed to have no idea what a census is or what a census (which is required by the U.S. Constitution) has to do with United States-style democracy and the reapportionment and redistricting of the United States House of Representatives. Students who knew about the U. S. Census often got the relationship backwards, saying that redistricting affects the Census rather than saying the Census provides the data needed for redistricting. In Part C some students made a “scale error” by enumerating consequences of school redistricting.

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?

First, make sure to cover all of the terms and concepts in the course description. If teachers had covered *census*, *population distribution*, *electoral geography*, and *gerrymandering* (all mentioned by name), students would have had no trouble answering this question. Second, bridge the gap between disciplines by looking for relationships between human geography and other courses students may have taken, specifically United States History, Civics, and Government, all of which usually cover redistricting and gerrymandering. Third, practice having students think about consequences of all phenomena that are taught in human geography, since questions about consequences are common among FROs. Prepare them also by explaining what *political* consequences are in contrast to *economic* or *social* consequences. Fourth, keep stressing scale. A question at the scale of Congressional Districts should not be answered by referring to school districts. Fifth, remember that Human Geography (like history and other social studies classes) prepares students to be good citizens, so citizenship themes should be teased out of the course description and covered thoroughly in class.

Question 2

What was the intent of this question?

Students were asked to (A) provide a definition of lingua franca, (B) identify and describe a historical factor that has contributed to the global use of English, and (C) identify and explain some examples of English as a global lingua franca. The purpose of this question was to ask for a straight-forward definition of an important concept in human geography that is taught in Part III of the course outline. Once defined, students were asked to think more holistically about the concept by drawing on other parts of the course outline. To answer this question, students should have drawn on Part I by referring to globalization (also in Part VI), on Part II by referring to historical migrations (of English-speaking peoples), on other sections of Part III by referring to popular culture, and on Part IV by referring to supranational organizations, colonialism, and imperialism. One of the big ideas behind this question was the relationship between contemporary geographical patterns (in this case, linguistic patterns) and how they are related to events of the past.

How well did students perform on this question?

The mean score on this question was 3.63 out of a total of 7 points. It was the highest scoring of the three FROs on the exam. Furthermore, the distribution of scores was decidedly bell-shaped (normal), with 20 percent scoring 4 points (the modal category), and 6 percent each scoring 0 points and 7 points. Almost all students were able to earn at least some points on this question. In Part A students were most likely to state the common definition of lingua franca, which had to include the idea of a language used to overcome communication barriers between people who spoke different languages. In Part B most student responses gravitated toward imperialism and colonialism, with a few referring to the long-standing popularity of English-speaking authors. In Part C explanations spanned the gamut of possibilities outlined on the rubric, but C1 through C3 were the most commonly chosen.

What were common student errors or omissions?

In terms of defining lingua franca (Part A), incorrect student responses usually stopped short of a complete definition. Just saying a language that facilitates trade, for instance, was not a correct response. In Part B the biggest reason why students did not earn points had to do with a misinterpretation of the word “historic.” Many contemporary examples, especially those related to the Internet, were not awarded points because they were not far enough removed from the present. There were not obvious errors or omissions in Part C.

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?

First, critical thinking arises from the application of precise definitions. That is why knowing a complete definition of lingua franca is important. Teachers should define terms precisely. Second, have students distinguish between historical explanations and contemporary explanations. Events that took place or phenomena that began during their own lifetimes or those of their parents/teachers are not yet historical.

Question 3

What was the intent of this question?

Students were asked to (A) define a term, refugee, that appears in the Human Geography course outline, (B) discuss reasons why refugees flee their countries of origin, (C) focus on the specific reasons why refugees fled one particular country, and (D) explain the impacts that refugees may have on a receiving country. An entire process of geographical movement, including its causes and consequences, is embodied in this question. The intent of this question was to see if students could explain a process, at the appropriate scale, from beginning to end, and in light of causes and consequences. A secondary purpose of this question was to signal the importance of connecting students taking the course to newsworthy events that are shaping the world. Events related to refugee populations have been ongoing for several decades, and they are frequently covered by news sources. Refugees are mentioned by name in Part II of the course outline.

How well did students perform on this question?

The mean score on this question was 3.20 out of a total of 8 points. Whereas the other two questions were worth 7 points each, this question was worth 8 points. This was the only question that required a four-part answer. The distribution of scores on this question was generally bell-shaped (normal), with 23 percent scoring 3 points, the modal category. However, only a handful (rounded to 0 percent) scored a perfect 8, and only 2 percent scored 7 points. At the other end of the scale, about 5 percent scored a 0 or did not make an attempt to answer the question. The reason why scores skewed to the low end of the scale was a problem of applying the geographic concept of scale in both Parts A and B. It had to be clear that refugees left one country and entered another as a result of widespread (perhaps countrywide) human or natural disasters. Particularly in the environmental category of 3B, simple answers like fleeing an earthquake earned no points.

What were common student errors or omissions?

In Part A refugees had to be defined as fleeing one country and entering another; otherwise, no point was awarded. In Part B environmental reasons frequently earned no points because environmental disasters were not specifically defined as operating at a scale large enough to generate flight across an international border. In addition, one-word answers (e.g., war) earned no points because it was backed up by no discussion. The most frequently missed points were the environmental reasons called for in Part B. In Part C points were not awarded if the following items were not all specified: selection of country, identification of an event, and

explanation of why refugees fled the country. Part D required explanation, so simple identification points were not awarded.

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?

First, “discuss” is defined by the authoritative Merriam-Webster dictionary this way: “write about (a topic) in detail, taking into account different ideas and opinions.” Rather than asking the test development committee to explain what it means by “discuss,” teachers should simply apply that definition. Second, because this is a geography course, students should always focus on scale issues. Refugees cross international borders; hence, the events that produce refugees must operate across large geographic areas. Third, in any discuss/explain question, single-word or single-phrase answers will receive no points. Key words are important, but only in the context of discussions and explanations. Fourth, current events provide opportunities to apply and refine student understanding of terms and concepts in human geography.