



Student Performance Q&A:

2015 AP® Italian Language and Culture Free-Response Questions

The following comments on the 2015 free-response questions for AP® Italian Language and Culture were written by the Chief Reader, Giuseppe Cavatorta of the University of Arizona. 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.

The course theme for the e-mail reply task was “*Scienza e tecnologia*.” The task required students to use the formal register to respond to two questions from Pierluigi Costa, Customer Services representative at Canale 7, about the students’ interest in subscribing to the Canale 7 TV programming and services during their stay in Italy. Students needed to answer two questions: (1) How many people are in your family, and what kinds of TV programs do you like? and (2) What other services are you interested in? Finally, the students had to ask for further details about something mentioned in the original e-mail.

How well did students perform on this question?

The mean score for the Standard Group¹ was 2.85 out of a possible 5 points. The mean score for the Total Group was 3.13. The E-mail Reply was statistically the second easiest task of all four free-response tasks for both the Standard Group and the Total Group.

¹ The Standard Group does not include students who hear or speak Italian at home or who have lived for one month or more in a country where Italian is the native language. Decisions about score distributions are based on the Standard Group.

What were common student errors or omissions?

- Most students maintained an exchange appropriate to the task, but many failed to seek additional details.
- Many students responded with sufficient elaboration and some with frequent and detailed elaboration. A few provided elaboration that was not appropriate to the task (off topic).

Many e-mails provided elaboration (e.g., the names of family members, the kinds of programs they like to watch, the services they are accustomed to using); many asked the most obvious question (What is the cost of services?), though a surprising number did not ask any questions.

- Many responses lacked accuracy and control of grammar, though they provided all the required information within the context of the task.

A few responses demonstrated limited to little control of grammar (in particular, recurring problems were subject-verb agreement, adjective-noun agreement, confusion between the future and the conditional, and inability to use the comparative and superlative structures), but it was problems with agreement (subject-verb, noun-adjective) that plagued even the best students.

- Many responses lacked varied vocabulary, though most contained appropriate vocabulary. Many responses contained spelling errors.

Often students used an inappropriate register, mostly in the body and the closing of the e-mail.

- There was a noticeable lack of idiomatic language, though that did not detract from responses that were fully understandable and contained frequent elaboration. Sometimes, when idiomatic language was used, it was not appropriate for formal correspondence, but consisted of obviously memorized phrases.
- The vast majority of respondents put their first and last names in their closing.

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 are already accustomed to responding to e-mails, but most of these involve interpersonal writing with friends in which the familiar register is used. This task, however, required the use of the formal register. Teachers should do the following to help students improve their performance:

- Guide students through the task's instructions and ensure that they know all its requirements.
- Explain the scoring guidelines for the task.
- Prepare simulated e-mail reply writing tasks for periodic practice under actual exam conditions, and score these practice responses using the scoring guidelines.

Assist non-native speaking students who continue to struggle with formal verbs and means of address. It would be helpful perhaps to stress more strongly the formal-familiar distinction through role playing, practice of both reading and answering business correspondence, and even creation of daily discourse (with one's doctor or lawyer, a store manager, or an adult stranger).

- Employ the six overarching themes in the construction of this exercise.
- Keep in mind that the skills required for successful completion of an AP language exam are skills that should be cultivated from the very beginning levels of language study. In the case of the E-mail Reply, practice can begin as early as in the first year of Italian through easy tasks (write to a friend, to a pen pal; introduce yourself; ask questions; etc.), so that students' e-mails can gradually, over the course of several years, acquire the level of complexity necessary for the AP task.

Use the four sample e-mail tasks (from 2012, 2013, 2014, and 2015) that are available online on AP Central® for the purpose of practice.

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.

The course theme for the persuasive essay task was “*Bellezza ed estetica*,” and the task focused on the extent to which the sponsorship of the private sector contributes to the survival of a country’s artistic heritage. The task presented a written text about the restoration of the Flavian Amphitheater in Rome, also known as the Coliseum. The restoration was sponsored by the luxury shoe company Tod’s, run by Diego Della Valle, which contributed 25 million Euros to the project. Also included was a table with data about the first 12 countries on the UNESCO World Heritage List ranked by number of sites. Italy is in first place on the list. Finally, an audio text discussed the richness of archeological sites around Naples and the impossibility of maintaining them and keeping them open because of a chronic lack of funding.

How well did students perform on this question?

The mean score for the Standard Group was 2.49 out of a possible 5 points. The mean score for the Total Group was 2.79. Both the Standard Group and the Total Group performed better statistically on the persuasive essays than on the presentational speaking task, but less well than on the interpersonal writing task.

What were common student errors or omissions?

Some students were not prepared to write a persuasive essay with clarity and accuracy. The following are some of the common problems experienced by students:

- Some students did not provide effective treatment within the context of the task, for example, not addressing all three sources while offering their own perspective.
- Some students did not address the specifics of the prompt and wrote about the topic in general terms.
- Some students did not demonstrate an understanding of the distinct points of view and the information contained in each of the sources, with specific references to each one.
- Some students did not integrate content from all three sources to support a thesis. They often cited or identified only one or two sources, with few specific details.
- Some students did not clearly and coherently present their own viewpoint together with a persuasive argument and substantive examples.

Some students did not cite sources or elaborate on the pertinence of the evidence being marshaled in support of an argument.

- Some students used memorized stock sentences/idiomatic language — often applied out of context.
- Some students had problems with the use of transitional elements or cohesive devices.

Some students poorly interpreted the graph/table.

Some students wrote lengthy summaries of the sources without effectively using the information in support of their own viewpoint.

- There was a lack of accuracy and variety in grammar, syntax, and usage, including complex grammatical structures such as subordinate clauses and contrary-to-fact structures. There were also frequent errors in subject-verb and noun-adjective agreement.
- Many students did not develop their paragraphs using both simple and compound sentences.

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 presentational writing task may be unfamiliar to many students. It requires a careful integration of three distinct sources of information (written text, graphic, and audio) along with the student's expression of his or her own point of view. Responding to this task is complex and requires students to have some practice with authentic materials. The Teachers' Resources section of the AP Central website offers a large number of such materials.

Students need practice in writing essays in which they have to refer to three separate sources as well as express their own opinion on a specific subject. It is important to tell students to carefully read the prompt and remember that their essay is above all a response to a prompt and that the information in the three sources should serve to support their answer to the prompt. Students should also spend some time outlining their essay prior to writing it.

An emphasis on authentic materials, defined as materials produced by native speakers of Italian for native speakers of Italian, is evident in this task, which contains an authentic text, graphic, and audio text. Teachers should introduce such materials into their classrooms so that students can become familiar with them.

It would be helpful to refer students to both the student samples and the scoring guidelines posted on AP Central so that they can see actual examples of essays from the 2012-2015 exams. Teachers should discuss the sample essays with students so that they have a clear idea of how the scoring guidelines are applied.

Students need practice in writing essays that reflect the actual exam conditions. They should develop a habit of giving their essays a final proofreading for common grammatical problem areas such as subject-verb agreement, noun-adjective agreement, the use of the subjunctive, the placement of accents, spelling, the use of transitional elements, staying on task, and the use of paragraphs.

Finally, it is important for Italian teachers to participate in Workshops and/or Summer Institutes so as to glean information about the task and then disseminate it to their students. It is imperative that students are aware of how the task works and how to complete it successfully on the day of the AP Exam.

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.

The course theme for the conversation task was “*Famiglia e società*.” For this task, the student needed to respond to five audio prompts spoken by Sabrina, a fellow Italian student, with whom the student is planning to start an Italian club.

1. Sabrina speaks about the project and asks the student what people do in the United States when they want to start a club. The student had to respond to the question.
2. Sabrina asks whether the student prefers to have a concert or a party for the first event of the club. The student had to make an alternate suggestion and explain why his or her idea might work better.
3. Sabrina accepts the student’s suggestion and asks the student what should be done in order to get everyone involved. The student had to express his/her ideas.
4. Sabrina agrees and asks when and where they should hold the first meeting. The student had to respond.
5. Sabrina is enthusiastic and asks whether they have forgotten anything. The student had to respond and provide an additional detail.

How well did students perform on this question?

The mean score for the Standard Group was 2.99 out of a possible 5 points. The mean score for the Total Group was 3.32. The Conversation was statistically the easiest of all four free-response tasks for both the Standard Group and the Total Group.

What were common student errors or omissions?

Students need to engage in activities that promote the ability to respond to dialogic situations in a natural and appropriate fashion, in line with the give-and-take of a speech event.

- There was a lack of comprehensibility and clarity of expression.

Some students had difficulties understanding common expressions like “*come*” or “*come si fa*.”

- Some students used elementary vocabulary instead of varied and rich vocabulary and idiomatic language.
- There was a lack of accuracy and variety in grammar, syntax, and usage, including errors of agreement (subject-verb, noun-adjective), misuse of articles, lack of subordinate clauses, incorrect usage, and errors in word order.

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 following suggestions would be useful for teachers to implement in order to familiarize students with this task:

- Students should be aware that they sometimes need to produce more than one language function in response to an audio prompt.
- Students should be aware that they may be asked to suggest an alternative.
- Although students speak in class, they may not have practice in sustained dialogues, as this task requires. It would be useful to familiarize students with various types of speech interactions (greetings, responses to questions, queries for information, leave-taking, providing details in response to increasingly complex prompts, etc.).

- Students should read and listen very carefully to the instructions concerning how to respond to the task, making connections between what they hear and what is written in the directions for the conversation.
- It is important that students practice this part of the exam with the equipment that will be used during the actual administration. Students should have practice responding to a series of five prompts, including ones that require them to initiate an exchange, such as by asking a question.
- Students need to develop a sense of how to respond in 20 seconds. This sort of practice needs to occur throughout the academic year.
- Students need to listen carefully to the prompt and say something relevant in response, even if what they say is brief.
- Students need to practice listening to a wide variety of male and female voices. Appropriate audio clips from various media would be useful for students both in and outside of the classroom. Many of these materials are easily accessible on the Internet, and AP Central has a list of links to audio materials.
- The speaking component in the classroom should not be solely focused on the conversation task. Rather, a variety of activities should be introduced into the curriculum, such as interviews and debates. Students need to be prepared to respond spontaneously to different situations. This will also improve fluency and confidence in their own linguistic abilities. At the same time, instructors need to pay attention to teaching verb tenses, increasing vocabulary, and so forth. Successful self-correction of an error is always viewed favorably.

It is vital that student responses are recorded properly, regardless of whether cassettes or digital recordings are used. To ensure that this happens, teachers should take the following steps:

- Prior to the exam, work with school authorities and the proctor to ensure that there will be no distracting noises while students are recording.
- Since it is important to ensure that the proctor knows how to administer the speaking section of the exam, review the relevant guidelines with the proctor well in advance of the administration.
- Common problems include too much background noise, recording at the wrong speed, recording on the wrong track, and recordings being cut off mid-response. A final equipment test just prior to the administration of the speaking section is a good practice.
- Remind students not to stop and start their machines while recording. Students should follow directions and start, pause, or stop the recorder only when told to do so; they should not pause or stop the recorder between individual questions.
- Prior to the exam, take students to the room and familiarize them with the equipment (some of them have never seen a cassette, and even CDs are becoming obsolete).
- Check to see how the CDs are burned using the school's equipment, and check all the recorded materials before shipping.

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 Italian-speaking world, demonstrating understanding of cultural features of the Italian-speaking world. Furthermore, the presentation had to be organized clearly.

The course theme for the cultural comparison task was "*Identità privata e pubblica*." The task consisted of a question asking the students to discuss the importance of "*fare bella figura*" (making a good impression)

in their community. In their oral presentations, students had to compare the topic in that context with the topic in an Italian context with which they are familiar.

How well did students perform on this question?

The mean score for the Standard Group was 1.81 out of a possible 5 points. The mean score for the Total Group was 2.15. The Cultural Comparison was statistically the hardest of all four tasks for both the Standard Group and the Total Group.

What were common student errors or omissions?

Common errors or omissions included the following:

- Some students did not address the topic and often made a general and generic comparison between Italy and their own country.
- Some students talked in general terms with no reference to any culture/community.
- Some students did not demonstrate a complete understanding of the Italian context to which they were comparing their own culture.
- Some students did not provide an organized presentation with a clear and orderly comparison of the two communities.
- Some students are still attracted by the “*Tema del corso*” and tend to focus on it, instead of developing the “*Argomento della relazione*.” This year the “*Tema del corso*” (“*Identità pubblica e privata*”) proved to be somewhat helpful and guiding students towards the concept of “*figura privata*” vs. “*figura pubblica*.” Nevertheless, paying too much attention to the “*tema del corso*” might be “dangerous” in that it might tempt students to develop a presentation which is partially or totally off topic, causing them to run out of time before they develop the correct topic effectively. Some students were not able to verbalize a comprehensible response with ease and clarity of expression, instead providing a series of disjointed words, phrases, or expressions that lacked cohesion and clarity.
- Several students misunderstood the prompt, and instead of talking about the importance of “*fare bella figura*” they talked about the importance of “*avere una bella figura*.” This misinterpretation led many students to produce a response that was completely off topic.
- Some students did not provide an accurate response containing variety in grammar, syntax, and usage; frequent grammatical and syntactic errors made comprehension difficult.
- Some students’ lack of correct pronunciation, intonation, and pacing impeded comprehension.
- Even some students whose performance was quite good were not free from stereotypes and were unable to treat the topic (within the context of the task) in depth.

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 need to remember that they must address all aspects of this task by making clear comparisons between their community and a community belonging to the target culture, as well as include accurate and appropriate examples. Likewise, linguistic aspects are important (pronunciation, intonation, pacing, register, grammar, syntax, usage, lexicon, and idiomatic expressions). Due to the anxiety and pressure that students may experience during the exam, it could be difficult for them to manage their time. Thus, teachers could suggest that students start their presentation by developing the topic within Italian culture first and, if they run out of time, return later to rhetorical strategies that might help establish the comparison with their own country/community. Because this is the only part of the exam where students are asked to demonstrate their

knowledge of Italian culture, a comparison that focuses on details about the target culture generally receives a better score than a comparison made the other way around. Teachers should instruct students to utilize T charts to highlight differences and similarities between the two cultures regarding a specific topic. However, students have to be constantly reminded that producing two lists corresponding to the two cultures is not sufficient for performing well on this task. A clear comparison must be made. So, again, rhetorical strategies should be taught to link similarities and contrast differences. Also, because Task 4 is a presentation, good organization is invaluable. A good organization makes the message more understandable. Teachers should also train their students to optimize the time they have (4 minutes) for carefully reading the prompt (the “*Argomento della relazione*” and not the “*Tema del corso*”) and preparing their presentation. Writing down key words or important aspects they want to touch on will provide them with an outline for their presentations. This will help them to logically organize their speech, write some complete sentences, if necessary; this will help them maintain the thread of their thoughts and might rescue them during their presentations, when the level of pressure and stress is higher.

As stated above, even students who performed well seemed to have some difficulty exploring cultural topics in a more in-depth way. AP students are not required to discuss the cultural topic abstractly. Nevertheless, they are expected to be able to go beyond “products” and “practices” and relate these two aspects to socio-cultural “perspectives.” Only by reflecting on perspectives will students be able to acquire a deeper understanding of both their own culture and the target language culture and to avoid stereotypes. In this regard, it is important that in class the presentation and discussion of cultural information is done exclusively in Italian. Teachers, who know their classes’ needs, can always push their students one step ahead, according to the formula $n+1$. In addition, they can provide ad hoc reinforcing exercises/activities that will enable students to expand and acquire the vocabulary needed to explore a new cultural theme.

Sometimes it seems that students have good ideas but are not able to fully develop them because their vocabulary is basic. As stated above, the exclusive use of Italian in class should be adopted from level I on, so that students can gradually build their vocabulary.

Teachers can emphasize and contextualize key words/concepts that can serve as starting points/thematic concepts to develop conceptual maps. Students, for instance, can create their own conceptual/thematic map by working in small groups; they can then brainstorm ideas and identify links that produce meaningful associations. Finally, they can work collectively and compare their results with those of the rest of the class to further expand and incorporate ideas and connections.

And finally language — in terms of grammar and syntax — should also not be neglected. Even if AP Italian Language and Culture readers are clearly instructed not to focus on single errors, it does not help the student’s performance when he/she says “*sappo*” instead of “*so*” or “*ando*” instead of “*vado*”; or when the student uses the wrong auxiliary verb in the “*passato prossimo*” with the most common verbs or does not conjugate verbs and uses instead the infinitive mode.

Teachers should be attentive also to the following points:

- Instruct students to read and follow the instructions very carefully.
- Provide models of comparisons between one’s home community and the target culture. These might include food, cities, transportation, and so forth.
- Provide actual timed testing situations based on exemplary test questions. The responses should be recorded, and those replies should be scored in accordance with the scoring guidelines.
- Help students become familiar with the equipment to be used during the administration of the actual exam.
- Expose students to as many authentic materials as possible. Devise out-of-class activities that involve exposure to authentic textual and audio materials.

In general, for all the questions on the exam, the most important suggestion for improving students' performance is to offer constant practice during AP courses by providing examples from previous exams. The AP Exam should be the final step of a well-built curriculum that integrates the interpersonal, presentational, and interpretive modes within a cultural context. These are all necessary skills that should be gradually developed in a well-articulated curriculum, with the AP course and exam being the culmination of the study of a language.