



## **Student Performance Q&A:**

### **2015 AP<sup>®</sup> Seminar Free-Response Questions**

The following comments on the 2015 free-response questions for AP<sup>®</sup> Seminar were written by the Chief Reader, Teresa Reed of The University of Tulsa. They give an overview of the exam questions and three components of the performance tasks and provide insights into how students performed, including typical student errors. General comments regarding the skills and content with which students frequently have the most problems 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.

#### **End of Course Exam, Section IA**

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

Question 1 in Section IA assessed the students' ability to:

- Read and analyze a single given text in its entirety;
- Identify the entire main idea of this text, whether or not the thesis is stated explicitly; and
- Identify the argument in this text.

Question 2 in Section IA assessed the students' ability to:

- Explain the author's line of reasoning in a single text by identifying claims and connections.

Question 3 in Section IA assessed the students' ability to:

- Identify evidence in the given text;
- Evaluate the author's use of evidence in support of the argument;
- Evaluate the credibility of the evidence; and
- Evaluate the relevance of the evidence.

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

For Question 1 in Section IA, the mean score was 2.20 out of a possible 3 points.

For Question 2 in Section IA, the mean score was 4.62 out of a possible 6 points.

For Question 3 in Section IA, the mean score was 4.07 out of a possible 6 points.

For Section IA, all questions combined, the mean score was 10.88 out of a possible 15 points.

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

For Question 1 in Section IA, common errors or omissions were:

- Focusing excessively on subordinate ideas
- Disregarding specific portions of the source
- Misidentifying or omitting key details from the source information
- Writing more than was necessary to answer the question

For Question 2 in Section IA, common errors or omissions were:

- Providing partial rather than complete answers; citing too few claims
- Providing minimal or no connections between the claims
- Neglecting to make a clear distinction between questions 1 and 2
- Providing a listing or summary of claims with no elaboration or contextualization
- Focusing exclusively on a single claim
- Focusing on the organization and/or writing style of the source rather than upon the claims presented
- Writing repetitive statements

For Question 3 in Section IA, common errors or omissions were:

- Listing the evidence with little or no evaluation of the evidence
- Repeating the author's argument
- Focusing upon the type of reasoning rather than upon the reasoning itself

***Based on your experience of student responses at the AP<sup>®</sup> Reading, what message would you like to send to teachers that might help them improve the performance of their students on the exam?***

- Teach the rubric and refer often to the QUEST framework.
- Emphasize the importance of legible handwriting.
- Ensure that students understand what a *claim* is.
- Help students to differentiate between *claims* and *evidence*.
- Have students practice writing responses that separately address each question.
- Instruct students to properly label each response (as "Question 2" or "Question 3" before moving on to the next question (or section).
- Urge students to avoid directly citing long quotes; paraphrase instead.
- Have students practice writing timed responses.
- Emphasize the importance of connecting claims to explain the author's line of reasoning.
- Teach students to avoid creating lists of or summaries of evidence.
- Teach students to evaluate evidence, and point out that some evidence merits a negative evaluation.
- Teach students to specifically justify why evidence is credible.
- Teach students to avoid generalizations.

## End of Course Exam, Section IB

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

This question assessed the students' ability to:

- Evaluate the quality of two different arguments in terms of their lines of reasoning;
- Join two texts in a dialogue with one another, producing a comparative analysis of each source's line of reasoning;
- Articulate their understanding of credible vs. weak evidence; and
- Read and critically evaluate the effectiveness of arguments in various genres or types of texts.

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

The mean score was 13.40 out of a possible 18 points.

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

- Assessing the strengths and weaknesses of an author's use of evidence in a vague or superficial way
- Relying on emotional content, personal biases, and beliefs rather than evidence
- Ambiguously articulating the *implications* and *limitations* inherent in the sources
- Confusing the titles of sources with their theses
- Overlooking a spectrum of strengths and weaknesses in an argument, assuming that a particular weakness in an argument means that the *entire* source is weak or invalid
- Writing long introductions with no analysis
- Writing long summaries with no analysis

### *Based on your experience of student responses at the AP<sup>®</sup> Reading, what message would you like to send to teachers that might help them improve the performance of their students on the exam?*

- Ensure that students understand *line of reasoning* and make sure they can
- Recognize it and discuss it.
- Provide frequent practice opportunities by assigning several similar comparison tasks involving two sources.
- Familiarize students with citation conventions for different genres of writing (for example, academic essays vs. newspaper articles vs. periodical articles, etc.).
- Teach students to avoid lengthy summaries of the sources' content; rather, encourage students to quickly engage critical thinking processes such as analysis, synthesis, and evaluation of arguments and evidence.
- Remind students that while structure and style conventions are important in composing any written response, the rubric for this particular task focuses on *content* and *critical thinking*.
- Encourage students to use as much space as they require (rather than attempting to fit a response into the space of a single piece of paper).
- Consider using the *TED Talks* Debate Series in class as a vehicle to teach skills around analyzing arguments and evaluating evidence.
- Remind students that legible handwriting is important.
- Stress the importance of time management during the exam. Simulate exam conditions in class before exam day arrives.
- Ensure that your class features a continuous cycle of tasks that call on the students to evaluate arguments and evidence, and maintain this cycle *throughout* the school year.

## End of Course Exam, Section II

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

This question assessed the students' ability to:

- Identify the theme or issue connecting four different provided sources;
- Read the provided sources critically, understanding the perspectives they each represent;
- Use the identified theme to write a logically organized, well-reasoned, and well-crafted argument presenting their own perspective;
- Select and incorporate two or more of the provided sources into the newly-developed argument;
- Cite the sources they used in their arguments, identifying them either by author or by letters assigned to the sources;
- Complete the reading of the provided sources, the identification of the theme, and the crafting of the new argument all within a timed setting.

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

The mean score was 15.28 out of a possible 24 points.

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

- Summarizing and analyzing the sources rather than using the sources to support an effective argument
- Ambiguously articulating the thesis, topic sentences, foundation, and substantiation necessary for a coherent, well-structured argument
- Accepting the sources at face value rather than deeply analyzing them (i.e., examining intent, bias, implications, limitations, time, place, etc.)
- Attempting to use the sources instead of selectively synthesizing relevant portions of the sources most germane to their arguments
- Incorporating inaccurate, inappropriate, or irrelevant outside evidence
- Adopting the sources' arguments rather than developing and offering a unique perspective
- Relying on an either/or fallacy; forgoing examination of ambiguities
- Overlooking the context of evidence, including quotations and statistics; exhibiting little or no regard for intent or historical placement
- Quoting material without introduction or contextualization

*Based on your experience of student responses at the AP<sup>®</sup> Reading, what message would you like to send to teachers that might help them improve the performance of their students on the exam?*

- Have students practice critically analyzing sources for perspective (e.g., bias, point of view), implications, limitations, context, and line of reasoning.
- Guide students in drawing connections between sources and placing sources in dialogue with one another.
- Have students practice outlining a thoughtful, nuanced argument that supports the main idea and addresses the counterargument, including specific, relevant evidence.
- Teach students to explore the complexities and ambiguities in a chosen focus area.
- Remind students that their immediate audience is the AP Reader, and that the examination provides the context for their writing, which should be formal and academic in tone.

## Performance Task 1, Individual Research Report

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

This prompt was intended to assess the students' ability to:

- Investigate a particular approach, perspective, or lens of the team's overall research project;
- Based upon this investigation, produce an evaluative, analytic report about research on the chosen academic or real-world problem or issue;
- Analyze a line of reasoning within the research;
- Analyze the credibility of the sources in which the evidence is located; and
- Produce a thoughtful, written reflection of the research process.

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

The mean score was 21.54 out of a possible 30 points.

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

- Over-paraphrasing information from the sources
- Over-quoting information from the sources
- Listing source information with little connection, evaluation, or analysis
- Neglecting to describe, identify, or construct a line of reasoning
- Presenting information irrelevant to the area of inquiry
- Providing vague or superficial evaluations of credibility, and/or equating credibility with a title or credential in a perfunctory way (e.g., "Katherine Smith, a professor, states that . . .")
- Writing in a style that was either excessively technical, general, or inappropriate for academic work

### *Based on your experience of student responses at the AP<sup>®</sup> Reading, what message would you like to send to teachers that might help them improve the performance of their students on the exam?*

- Give students adequate time to refine the controlling team question, one that is debatable, researchable, and invites multiple perspectives. Teach students that initial research informs the selected question, and the selected question informs subsequent research.
- Work with students on evaluating and analyzing the source material; help students craft sentences that either signal ideas derived from the research or represent their own evaluative statements.
- Teach students to locate lines of reasoning in the research.
- Teach students that they are not obligated to include every piece of information they find. If students are anxious to show the breadth of research conducted, reports can include lists of "Works Cited" as well as "Works Consulted."
- Teach students to smoothly integrate an evaluation of the credibility of sources into the report. Writers should introduce evidence with phrases and sentences, and these "attributive" statements can assist in evaluating credibility.
- Work with students on finding an appropriate balance between summative statements and specific detail.
- Teach students how to incorporate graphical evidence if appropriate to the discipline.

## Performance Task 1, Written Team Report

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

This prompt was intended to:

- Assess the students' ability to conduct collaborative research; and
- Assess the students' ability to collaborate in the development of a cohesive, well-written argument on a chosen topic.

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

The mean score was 19.12 out of a possible 30 points.

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

- Selecting a vague or poorly scoped research question
- Making broad generalizations
- Neglecting to address consequences and implications
- Pasting together the Individual Research Reports as separate elements, rather than providing a cohesive document that integrates several lenses
- Formatting incorrectly (single-spacing instead of double-spacing, using fonts that were difficult to read due to color or small size)
- Forgetting to redact student and/or teacher names
- Disregarding the stipulated word count by submitting a document that has far too few, or far too many, words
- Using "I" and "my" excessively
- Relying on faulty premises, thereby leading to faulty arguments
- Confusing the overall report with the argument
- Incorporating too much opinion
- Jumping to conclusions in the evaluations of sources
- Neglecting to discuss or contextualize the pictures/charts/maps used in arguments or minimizing their importance
- Writing excessively lengthy paragraphs
- Confusing *solutions* with *conclusions*
- Inconsistently citing sources

*Based on your experience of student responses at the AP<sup>®</sup> Reading, what message would you like to send to teachers that might help them improve the performance of their students on the exam?*

- Teach students to differentiate between collaboration and cooperation.
- Emphasize the importance of solid paragraph structure; encourage students to break very lengthy paragraphs into smaller, more digestible ones.
- Teach students how to develop a strong research question.
- Teach students to balance citation of evidence with commentary that evaluates the evidence.
- Remind students to consider the validity of sources in supporting arguments.
- Utilize peer review; allow partners to practice sharing, editing, and revising written work.

## Performance Task 2, Individual Written Argument

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

This prompt was intended to:

- Create an opportunity to enter into academic conversation;
- Create an academic experience to prepare students for entry-level college writing;
- Assess students' ability to generate a relevant research question based on provided stimulus material;
- Assess students' ability to make a statement/claim with appropriate commentary to support a position or argument;
- Assess students' ability to thoroughly synthesize other's ideas with one's own interpretation;
- Assess students' ability to explore and evaluate multiple perspectives and derive a position in alignment with the evidence provided;
- Assess students' ability to identify scholarly sources with appropriate citation;
- Assess students' ability to understand the difference between opinion and evidence;
- Assess students' ability to analyze body of work/read/devise thesis and then create an argument that involves complexity;
- Assess students' ability to support claims and ground originality of thought in synthesis and analysis;
- Assess students' ability to generate responses that successfully incorporate a range of sources, including peer reviewed work;
- Assess students' ability to not merely acknowledge, but to evaluate different perspectives;
- Assess students' ability to read and understand a variety of complex texts; and
- Assess students' ability to conduct scholarly and responsible research and articulate an evidence-based argument that clearly communicates the conclusion, solution, or answer to the stated research question.

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

The mean score was 26.83 out of a possible 42 points.

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

- Omitting a well-defined research question of appropriate scope
- Neglecting to provide clear, direct connections to source material
- Relying excessively on block quotes for source content
- Neglecting to present counter arguments
- Augmenting the argument of the source rather than generating a thoughtful, dynamic question
- Neglecting to establish evidence relevant to the student argument
- Inconsistently or incorrectly applying citations
- Omitting a bibliography
- Disregarding the stipulated word count by providing extensive footnotes, annotated bibliography, or writing far in excess of the limit
- Neglecting to proofread for grammar and spelling
- Providing ambiguous distinctions among *claim*, *evidence*, and *commentary*
- Organizing writing in an illogical or difficult to follow manner
- Confusing *perspective* with *lens*
- Focusing excessively on credibility of the author and not enough on credibility of the research
- Summarizing rather than expanding on a topic

- Offering one perspective rather than incorporating several perspectives appropriate to a discussion of the researched topic

*Based on your experience of student responses at the AP® Reading, what message would you like to send to teachers that might help them improve the performance of their students on the exam?*

- Encourage students to be explicit in what their paper will explore; offer a clear, well-scoped research question.
- Encourage students to make their connection to the source material explicit and articulate. Refer them to the task directions.
- Help students devise a research question that invites an argument with multiple perspectives and is of appropriate scope.
- Make sure the response answers the research question while exploring a diversity of perspectives and possible objections and limitations.
- Help students understand why they are citing sources.
- Teach a specific style of citation (AP Seminar does not have a prescribed style guide).
- Help students understand the difference between *perspective* and *lens*; remind them that using different lenses does not necessarily lead to multiple perspectives. Look to the glossary for clarity.
- Teach students how to use academic data bases; have them use at least a few peer-reviewed journal articles.
- Teach students to form conclusions that effectively address the implications of their research.
- Teach students to distinguish between paraphrasing others' ideas and generating their own commentary to connect claims and evidence.
- Remind students to use proper formatting for readability during the scoring process.
- Explain to students that the credibility for a source is best established by locating citations near the evidence.
- Encourage students to carefully review the rubric(s) to appreciate the specific discrete skills required to earn full points.
- Help students focus claims to support their arguments.
- Remind students to carefully analyze the logic of arguments cited and arguments made. V
- Teach students how to deal with flaws in their logic.