



Student Performance Q&A:

2016 AP[®] German Language and Culture Free-Response Questions

The following comments on the 2016 free-response questions for AP[®] German Language and Culture were written by the Chief Reader, Jennifer Redmann of Franklin & Marshall College in Lancaster, Pa. 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 Families and Communities (*Familie und Gemeinschaft*), students replied to an e-mail from Charlotte Fischer, chairperson of the Nature Protection League of Hannover. In the opening of her message, Ms. Fischer expresses her pleasure that the student is interested in working as a volunteer for the Nature Protection League. She goes on to mention that the League has several projects planned for the coming summer in which the student could participate. Some of the projects require physical outdoor work, but a student who preferred to work indoors could also be given a placement in the visitors' center. In the next paragraph, the students are asked what kind of work they would be most interested in (*Könnten Sie uns bitte mitteilen, was für eine Naturschutz-Arbeit Sie am meisten interessiert?*) and whether they have particular knowledge or skills that could be helpful in their work with the Nature Protection League (*Haben Sie schon bestimmte Vorkenntnisse oder Fähigkeiten, die bei der Arbeit nützlich sein könnten?*). Ms. Fischer also notes that it would be helpful if the student would fill out the attached form and return it via e-mail or post. Ms. Fischer closes the e-mail with assurances that she would be happy to answer any questions the student might have. Students were to ask for more details about something in the message; possible topics included questions about the Nature Protection League's projects, the hours and/or location of the visitors' center, and when the student might be able to begin work.

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?

Students generally understood the context of the E-mail Reply and most were able to respond appropriately to Ms. Fischer's questions. However, the words "bestimmte Vorkenntnisse und Fähigkeiten" (particular knowledge or skills) in one of the questions proved to be confusing to some students, leading them to produce inappropriate responses. Many students struggled to maintain a formal register throughout the e-mail reply, addressing the recipient by her first name or shifting to informal pronouns in the body of the e-mail. Although the vast majority of students responded to the two questions posed in the e-mail, many failed to ask for more details about something in the message, as specified in the task directions. Some students who did follow the task directions provided only minimal answers to the questions, and that lack of elaboration hampered the naturalness and appropriateness of the students' 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?

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 writing replies, 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 imagine that the e-mail is addressed to them personally and not be confused by impersonal salutations like "Dear Student." It is imperative that students adhere to the task directions, answering all of the questions posed in the e-mail *and* asking for more details. Students should work on maintaining a formal register throughout their e-mail replies and pay close attention to how register is reflected in pronouns and word choice, as well as in salutations and closings. Overuse of memorized phrases should, however, be avoided, since it may hamper student production of meaningful content in their e-mail replies.

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, within the theme of Contemporary Life (*Alltag*), students wrote essays in response to the question of whether people today are too fixated on fitness and physical beauty (*Sind die Menschen heute zu sehr auf Fitness und Schönheit fixiert?*). The print source (*Quellenmaterial 1*) argues for the importance of regular physical activity for overall health and wellness, touching on several positive effects of exercising at least three times a week for 20 minutes. Regular participation in endurance activities, such as jogging or biking, can help individuals maintain their weight and regulate their blood pressure as they age. Individuals who are fit are more effective at their jobs, and physical activity aids in a child's healthy development.

Quellenmaterial 2, a bar graph, summarizes the results of a survey that asked over 3,000 Germans between the ages of 14 and 25 what aspects of life they considered to be most important or worth striving for. Along with health and fitness, answers included good friends, family, a satisfying profession, and a secure job. *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 physician and theologian offered a critique of the contemporary fascination with health and fitness, arguing that the constant striving for physical fitness and beauty detracts from an individual's ability to enjoy life fully.

How well did students perform on this question?

Students performed well on Task 2, the Persuasive Essay, which had a mean of 3.30 out of a possible score of 5.

What were common student errors or omissions?

While students were generally able to offer an opinion on the topic, not all students were able to comprehend and use the source material effectively. Some students presented inaccurate information from the sources in their arguments, especially when drawing on source 3, the audio text. (For example, although the speaker in source 3 spoke critically of an “obsession” with wellness, the fact that he was identified as a medical doctor led some students to assume that he was in favor of people concentrating on exercise and fitness.) 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 whether individuals are too fixated on physical fitness and beauty, leading to many 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 for 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. They should also be aware, however, that the sources may provide arguments on *both* sides of the issue, and should not interpret them in black-or-white terms. 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. When students effectively integrate their own personal observations and experiences with arguments from the source material, they usually produce strong essays.

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 (e.g., Q1 for *Quellenmaterial 1*) 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. While it is helpful for students to learn phrases typically found in academic essays (such as *laut des Textes* or *meiner Meinung nach*), they can detract from the persuasiveness of the student's argument when used too frequently or inappropriately. Finally, teachers should remind students that legible handwriting and correct punctuation, especially commas, contribute enormously to the readability of their essays. Students should practice producing clear, handwritten essays — in pen and under a time limit.

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. The conversation proceeded and included 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 and the simulated interlocutor’s utterance.

In this exam, within the theme of Contemporary Life (*Alltag*), the interlocutor (Gabi) opens the conversation by asking how the student is and whether the student has time to talk with Gabi about a question that she has. The student is supposed to respond by greeting Gabi and asking for more details about her question. In the second turn Gabi tells the student that she is thinking about applying to participate in an international exchange program and asks the student’s opinion about such programs (*Was meinst du? Was hältst du von solchen Austauschprogrammen?*) The student is directed to offer an opinion and give a reason for it. In the third turn Gabi explains a problem that she has: her parents think she is too young to go abroad as an exchange student. She then asks the student what arguments she could use to convince her parents to let her go. The student should respond by suggesting possible arguments that Gabi could offer her parents. Gabi thanks the student and asks if a year abroad would be too long a time to be away. The printed conversation outline instructs the student to answer the question and also offer a rationale for the answer. In the final turn Gabi shifts the topic of the conversation to plans for the evening and asks if the student would like to go for ice cream — Gabi’s treat. The student is supposed to conclude the conversation with a response to the invitation.

How well did students perform on this question?

The mean score for Task 3, the Conversation, was 3.27 out of a possible score of 5, the lowest of the four free-response tasks.

What were common student errors or omissions?

In general, students understood the situation and related well to the topic of student exchanges. A few students assumed that the topic of the conversation was cafeteria food because the school cafeteria is identified in the task overview as the location for the conversation, but strong students used the cafeteria setting as an appropriate springboard for the first turn in the conversation. Failure to adhere to the conversation overview led some students to respond inappropriately to Gabi’s questions and statements; others offered appropriate but overly brief answers. In two of the turns, students were directed by the conversation overview to give a reason or rationale (*begründen Sie*) for their opinion or answer, but in many of the weak or poor performances, students were unable to do so. In the final turn, a number of students did not understand the idiomatic phrase “my treat” (*ich lad’ dich ein*), and responded to Gabi’s invitation inappropriately as a result. In some cases, students did not maintain an informal register throughout the conversation.

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 *ein Austauschprogramm mit einer Schule im Ausland*) 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 *begründen* or *einen Vorschlag machen*) and the phrases that one would use to support an opinion, make a suggestion, 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. Although students are not required to fill the 20 seconds in which they respond to each turn, they should be encouraged to elaborate within their responses and say as much as they can (while still maintaining the appropriateness of their responses). 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: *Ist das zu lang?* — *Ja, das ist zu lang.*)

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 Science and Technology (*Naturwissenschaft und Technologie*), students were asked about the role of driving cars and public transportation in their communities (*Welche Rolle spielen Autofahren und öffentliche Verkehrsmittel in Ihrer Umgebung?*). In their oral presentations, students compared perspectives on this question in their home community with those in a German-speaking region, and were also invited to describe their own observations, experiences, or school lessons.

How well did students perform on this question?

Students performed well on Task 4, the Cultural Comparison, which had a mean of 3.30 out of a possible score of 5, significantly higher than in past years.

What were common student errors or omissions?

In general, students understood the topic of the presentation and were able to talk for 2 minutes about the theme of driving and public transportation in their own communities and in German-speaking cultures. While the vast majority of students were able to describe or list cultural differences with regard to transportation, many failed to address the role that various forms of transportation play in the two communities, as called for in the prompt. In some of the poor or unacceptable performances, students understood only the word "Auto" and described specific cars rather than issues related to driving. Some students opened their presentations with lengthy introductions that limited the time they were able to devote to the topic itself. Other students spent a disproportionate amount of time discussing their own community and culture, and as a result were not able to elaborate adequately on the target culture.

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 opportunities 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. Alternatively, students may want to alternate between the two cultures in making points related to the topic of the presentation.

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.