



Student Performance Q&A

2016 AP[®] Seminar End-of-Course Exam and Performance Tasks

The following comments on the 2016 constructed responses for AP[®] Seminar were written by the Chief Reader, Teresa Reed of the University of Tulsa. They give an overview of how students performed on each prompt or task, 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.

End-of-Course Exam, Section IA

Section IA of the End-of-Course Exam includes three questions.

What was the intent of Question 1 of Section IA?

This question assessed students' ability to identify all parts of the main idea of a passage.

The author argued that sweatshops in third-world countries ultimately benefit the economy of those countries. Unrestricted free trade in these regions allows for low-level factory jobs to eventually bring higher wages and better working conditions through competition. Once economic progress is achieved, only then are these countries in a position to ban child labor.

What were common student errors or omissions?

The most common error was that students failed to completely identify the author's main idea. Most students correctly identified that third-world countries relied on child labor for economic survival. Many students, however, neglected to mention the author's point that sweatshops are part of a process of strengthening the economy, thus allowing for the eventual elimination of child labor.

How well did students perform on this question?

The mean score was 2.1 out of a possible 3 points. In 2015, the mean score was 2.2.

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?

- Stress that the main idea is general and summarizes the important and controlling ideas of the passage.
- Teach students that a main idea may not necessarily be found in a “thesis statement.” Rather than trying to locate a specific thesis statement or topic sentence, students should read the article closely and then determine and articulate the main idea, with its components parts, in their own words.
- Teach students to distinguish between a *topic* and a *main idea*, keeping in mind that a main idea will often address more than one topic.
- Tell students to convey the entire main idea, not just a portion of it.

What was the intent of Question 2 of Section IA?

This question assessed students’ ability to:

- Explain the author’s line of reasoning by identifying the claims used to build the argument;
- Explain the connections between the identified claims; and
- Detect the organization of the argument.

How well did students perform on this question?

The mean score was 4.8 out of a possible 6 points. In 2015, the mean score was 4.62.

What were common student errors or omissions?

- Identifying only the explicit, most obvious claim
- Failing to recognize child labor as a means to end child labor
- Rushing to identify bold headings as claims
- Failing to distinguish between evidence and claims
- Failing to fully explain the author’s line of reasoning

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?

- Explain the difference between a *claim* and *evidence* that supports the claim.
- Give practice exercises using complex texts that provide both implicit and explicit ideas and arguments.

What was the intent of Question 3 of Section IA?

This question assessed students’ ability to:

- Read, comprehend, and evaluate a complex passage;
- Determine whether the writer’s claims were supported by evidence; and
- Identify and assess the evidence in terms of credibility and relevance.

How well did students perform on this question?

The mean score was 4.5 out of a possible 6 points. In 2015, the mean score was 4.07.

What were common student errors or omissions?

- Neglecting to identify the evidence
- Making vague generalizations about overall credibility and/or relevance without addressing specific examples of the evidence cited in the article
- Neglecting to address the credibility and/or the relevance of the evidence as related to the argument
- Using this section of the test to analyze or evaluate the author's claims without discussing specific evidence or delving into the credibility of the evidence
- Evaluating the evidence by using rhetorical appeals (logos, ethos, and pathos) which, while not an error, was superfluous (unless the student also addressed credibility and relevance)
- Misreading or misinterpreting the evidence, including misattributing the source of the evidence when no source was given in the article. (For example, students repeatedly used the BBC as the source for Cambodia's loss of \$10 million and hundreds of jobs. While the author asserted that this loss was a *result* of the BBC exposé, he did not give a source for the information about the job loss. Many students, however, stated that the job loss statistic was credible evidence because it came from the BBC).

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?

- Teach students to avoid vague generalizations about credibility or relevance.
- Teach students to address each piece of evidence directly.
- Urge students to analyze *both* the credibility *and* the relevance of each piece of evidence they discuss.
- Remind students that credible sources may be used in ways that are not relevant to the argument at hand.
- Tell students to refrain from responding with personal opinions or outside information, regardless of their feelings about the passage provided. If the argument is not convincing, they should explain why in terms of the line of reasoning (Question 2 of Section 1A) and the relevance/credibility of the evidence (Question 3 of Section 1A).
- Give complex practice readings that require students to detect lines of reasoning and to distinguish between strong evidence and filler.

General suggestions to teachers for Section 1A:

- Stress the importance of legible handwriting.
- Stress the importance of writing concise, thoughtful responses without meandering or including superfluous information.
- Get students to recognize and cite specific details, avoiding vague assertions that merely repeat the language of the question.
- Instruct students to respond to each question in Section 1A on the designated pages of the exam booklet. Each question should be answered separately, not as one continuous, long essay.

End of Course Exam, Section IB

What was the intent of this prompt?

Section IB assessed students' ability to:

- Evaluate and compare two articles by analyzing the line of reasoning in each;
- Detect the strengths and weaknesses of the articles;
- Compare implications and limitations of each argument;
- Address and analyze various pieces of evidence for credibility and relevance;
- Think critically about information and its validity; and
- Write cogently and coherently to communicate ideas.

How well did students perform on this question?

The mean score was 11.8 out of a possible 18 points. In 2015, the mean score was 13.4.

What were common student errors or omissions?

- Failing to articulate the implications and limitations of one or both articles
- Focusing too heavily on credibility at the exclusion of all else
- Failing to address the strengths and weaknesses of the arguments
- Describing authors and/or sources as “credible” or “biased” without explaining *why* they may be so
- Assessing the credibility and relevance of an author's use of evidence in a vague or superficial way
- Discussing one article's limitations or implications in great detail and completely skipping over the other
- Addressing both articles' limitations and/or implications in a vague or overgeneralized way
- Spending too much time on authorial credibility
- Providing an uneven, one-sided analysis resulting from the student's clear preference for one article over the other
- Making over-generalizations

Section IB of the exam is being eliminated. However, 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 in the course?

- Ensure that students understand the difference between a *summary* and an *analysis*.
- Teach students to identify and recognize the line of reasoning of an argument.
- Show examples of weaknesses and limitations in an argument.
- Expose students to a variety of non-fiction sources throughout the year.

End of Course Exam, Section II

What was the intent of this prompt?

This prompt assessed students' ability to:

- Identify a theme or issue connecting four different provided sources;
- Read the sources critically, understanding the perspective each represented;
- Use the identified theme to write a logically organized, well-reasoned, and well-crafted argument presenting their own perspective;
- Utilize two or more of the sources to support the newly-developed argument;
- Cite the sources used in their arguments, identifying them either by author or by letters assigned to the sources and paraphrasing or identifying quotes; and
- Complete reading of the sources, identification of the theme, and crafting of their own argument within a designated time frame.

How well did students perform on this prompt?

The mean score was 14.7 out of a possible 24 points. In 2015, the mean score was 15.28.

What were common student errors or omissions?

- Failing to state a clear position/thesis statement/argument
- Summarizing sources rather than using them to develop and support a clear argument
- Using numerous quotations rather than developing a line of reasoning and using quotations intentionally to support that line of reasoning
- Failing to fully understand the perspective or position of the provided source(s)
- Assuming that all sources share the same, often simplistic, theme: "Space," "Culture," "Identity," "Environment"
- Repeating a simple thesis throughout the essay, rather than building an argument
- Misreading a source or bringing in outside materials that are patently inaccurate or oversimplified
- Failing to recognize the distinctions between different kinds of sources — essay, report, literature
- Failing to articulate why a piece of evidence matters for the argument, asking the "so what" question (Source A says X, Y, Z and that is important for my argument because...)
- Reading sources only to locate contrived quotations to fit the student's "argument" rather than reading and understanding the sources as a whole
- Failing to organize the response, resulting in an essay that is simply stream of consciousness
- Writing a narrative or compare/contrast essay, rather than creating an argument linked to the theme using two or more sources
- Delivering a "stock" essay that only tangentially connects to the sources and then "crowbars" the sources into that essay
- Framing the argument around a cliché — "Home is where the heart is" — making it difficult to articulate counterarguments
- Framing the argument in absolutes, making it difficult to articulate counterarguments
- Using either overly formal or overly informal language rather than speaking in a scholarly tone appropriate to the task
- Engaging in a rant rather than an argument
- Failing to proofread to correct awkward, incomplete, or convoluted sentences that make the argument difficult to understand
- Writing illegibly, making it difficult to receive credit for the substance of the argument

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?

- Practice developing arguable claims and complicated questions without trite answers.
- Avoid the standard five-page essay.
- Ask students to read several short sources, write down the argument in each of those sources and then make notes about how the sources relate to one another.
- Practice outlining an answer involving two or more sources.
- Caution students against reading sources to choose quotations.
- Warn students against recycling an old essay or drafting an essay before taking the exam, since such an essay is unlikely to fit the theme of the prompts.
- Read essays in different voices — formal, informal, “scholarly” — to illustrate how the tone of an essay is important.
- Help students to develop their own scholarly voice.
- Discuss the use of outside evidence; it is optional and should not be utilized unless it clearly supports the argument.
- Introduce the End-of-Course tasks early in the year to assist students in understanding what skills are being built and to what end.
- Remind students to contemplate why different sources have been placed together.
- Remind students to *write legibly*; while readers do their best to give credit for the substance of the answer, indecipherable writing impedes that process.
- Give students opportunities to work with literary and other artistic texts.

Performance Task 1, Individual Research Report

What was the intent of this task?

This task assessed students’ ability to:

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

How well did students perform on this task?

The mean score was 20.9 out of a possible 30 points. In 2015, the mean score was 21.54.

What were common student errors or omissions?

- Providing an insufficient variety of perspectives, or repetitive arguments from the same point of view
- Relying too heavily on one type of source
- Blending information from sources with student’s original writing
- Neglecting to proofread for grammar and spelling
- Providing limited analysis of the line of reasoning of a source
- Restating information gathered from sources

- Exceeding word count
- Neglecting to match citations in text with bibliography
- Omitting a bibliography or internal citations
- Relying excessively on quoting information from sources
- Providing vague or superficial evaluations of credibility

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?

- Enforce the word limit.
- Encourage students to use academic sources.
- Ensure that students can differentiate between *perspective* and *lens*.
- Ensure that students can differentiate between *credibility*, *relevance*, and *validity*.
- Take advantage of peer editing at multiple stages of the Performance Tasks.
- Give students adequate time to refine the controlling team question, one that is debatable, researchable, and invites multiple perspectives.
- Encourage students to review the rubric periodically while completing the Performance Task.

Performance Task 1, Written Team Report

What was the intent of this task?

This task assessed students' ability to:

- Conduct collaborative research; and
- Collaborate in the development of a cohesive, well-written argument on a chosen topic.

How well did students perform on this task?

The mean score was 21.1 out of a possible 30 points. In 2015, the mean score was 19.12.

What were common student errors or omissions?

- Choosing topics that are too sophisticated to comprehend
- Choosing positions that are difficult to argue
- Selecting vague, poorly scoped, nested, yes/no, or ineffectual research questions
- Making broad generalizations
- Using strings of quotes with no commentary
- Organizing sections according to lenses rather than presenting a synthesized argument
- Presenting a combination of isolated arguments as the Written Team Report
- Using faulty evidence, resulting in faulty arguments
- Confusing *lens* and *perspective*
- Incorporating opinions and rants into the report
- Presenting underdeveloped conclusions and solutions
- Failing to connect conclusions and solutions to the research question or the evidence
- Presenting underdeveloped perspectives
- Forgetting to redact student and/or teacher names
- Confusing a report with an argument
- Writing excessively lengthy paragraphs

- Citing sources inconsistently
- Allowing evidence to control the argument
- Addressing the credibility and evaluation of evidence in the footnotes rather than in the body of the argument
- Formatting incorrectly (irregular and inconsistent fonts, spacing issues, etc.)
- Focusing excessively on credentials at the expense of the argument itself

The Written Team Report is being eliminated. However, 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 in the course?

- Emphasize the importance of paragraph structure.
- Encourage students to break lengthy paragraphs into smaller, more digestible ones.
- Teach students the difference between an arguable topic and a non-arguable topic.
- Show students how to develop strong and complex research questions.
- Teach students to balance evidence with commentary so that there is a voice in the argument.
- Teach students to evaluate the credibility *and* the relevance of the evidence.
- Teach students how to link claims with evidence so that a strong synthesis occurs throughout the argument.
- Teach students how to lead into an indirect quote.
- Utilize peer editing which will allow partners to practice sharing, editing, and revising written work.
- Teach students how these written skills need to transfer into the Team Media Presentation and the Individual Written Argument.

Performance Task 2, Individual Written Argument

What was the intent of this task?

This task assessed students' ability to:

- Enter into the academic conversation;
- Write at the college level;
- Generate a relevant research question based on provided stimulus material;
- Synthesize information from provided sources;
- Identify a theme rather than simply isolate a topic for an expository or descriptive essay;
- Conduct an independent inquiry of specific interest;
- Conduct scholarly research;
- Read, analyze, and evaluate complex arguments;
- Transition the research process from conception to written document;
- Generate their own perspective/position from the context of the source materials;
- Articulate an evidence-based argument avoiding oversimplification;
- Evaluate the credibility and relevance of evidence and/or resources that they have discovered and intend to use;
- Use relevant and credible evidence to support claims and cite sources correctly;
- Challenge claims and critique arguments;
- Evaluate multiple perspectives on a single topic;
- Reach conclusions and formulate arguments that are connected to evidence; and
- Acknowledge the limitations and/or implications of their own conclusions, solutions, and/or resolutions.

How well did students perform on this task?

The mean score was 27.7 out of a possible 42 points. In 2015, the mean score was 26.83.

What were the common student errors or omissions?

- Asking an overly broad research question (e.g., “Is globalization good?”)
- Neglecting to cite source(s) used in the response
- Asking a research question that is expository instead of argumentative
- Creating thesis statements that were often narrative and not argumentative
- Making only tenuous connections to the stimulus materials
- Misinterpreting the source material prior to forming a research question
- Summarizing instead of synthesizing information
- Announcing the credentials of sources rather than evaluating credibility
- Failing to appropriately reference or situate the source documents
- Using generic or vague headers
- Submitting papers that were written for other courses and/or retrofitting papers
- Addressing lenses rather than exploring different points of view
- Neglecting to ultimately answer the question that has been asked
- Neglecting to critique their argument/conclusion by discussion implications or limitations
- Inconsistently adhering to a specific style (inclusive of citations as well as bibliography)
- Neglecting to use an academic/peer reviewed source
- Citing dictionaries, Wikis, and *BuzzFeed* articles as academic sources
- Failing to evaluate sources in the body of the paper rather than in the footnotes or annotated bibliography (which was beyond the recommended word count)

Based on your experience reading student responses for AP Seminar, what message would you like to send to teachers that might help them to improve the performance of their students?

- Teach the stimulus materials in class.
- Plan activities to explore and process the articles before asking students to develop questions.
- Help students to develop and revise research questions that are authentically connected to the source material.
- Help students develop strong, focused, complex questions that invite debate, as broad questions lead to overly general papers that are often more expository than argumentative.
- Consider localizing the research topic rather than dealing with issues on a national or global scale.
- Make the research question the title of the paper or have students explicitly state the question in their introduction. Guessing leads to misunderstanding.
- Help students to understand the difference between lenses and perspectives.
- Remind students that lenses are a means through which to uncover various perspectives. They are not an endpoint.
- Remind students that alternate points of view must be dealt with thoroughly rather than just stating that some people might think differently.
- Make the connection to the stimulus material explicit and list the article(s) in the bibliography; situate them appropriately (i.e., “Baldwin’s letter was written in the 1960’s.”).
- Be sure to expose students to logical fallacies so that they can identify them *and* so that they can avoid them in their responses.
- Encourage students to think about their topic and their answer to their research question before they start writing.

- Remind students that research should not be just to support preconceived opinions.
- Remind students that the paper should be an argument, not a report.
- Teach students that the argument should be a synthesized response to the question rather than a summary of opinions or of sources.
- Encourage students to choose quality sources and to use a wide variety. Remind them to include an academic source.
- Tell students to ask “from whom?”, “from where?”, and “how are the ideas in the source formulated?” when evaluating the credibility of sources.
- Remind students that the paper must explain *how* the evidence used connects to claims made.
- Encourage judicious selection of direct quotations.
- Alert students that statements like “This shows that...” after presenting evidence tend to lead to summary rather than to analytical commentary.
- Remind student that their own voices should be distinguishable from the evidence presented in the paper.
- Teach students to write conclusions that tell the reader how the research influenced the conclusion or solution.
- Instruct students to select a style guide (MLA, APA, or another appropriate guide) and to follow it consistently.