



Student Performance Q&A:

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

The following comments on the 2016 free-response questions for AP[®] Spanish Language and Culture were written by the Chief Reader, Jeffrey Reeder of Sonoma State University. They give an overview of each free-response question and of how students performed on the question, including typical student errors. General comments regarding the skills and content that students frequently have the most problems with are included. Some suggestions for improving student performance in these areas are also provided. Teachers are encouraged to attend a College Board workshop to learn strategies for improving student performance in specific areas.

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 student was asked to write a reply in response to an e-mail message received requesting a donation to help protect animals in an animal refuge center. In the reply, the student was asked to include a greeting and a closing, respond to two questions that were addressed in the e-mail, and ask for more details and information about the topic in the original message. The student was also asked to use a formal form of address in their response.

How well did students perform on this question?

Among the Standard Group¹ of students (those whose experience with the language has come primarily through classroom instruction), the Mean Score was 3.55 out of a possible 5 points, and the Standard Deviation was 0.99. Among the total group (all examinees), the Mean Score was 3.71, and the Standard Deviation was 0.97.

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

What were common student errors or omissions?

Students included a greeting and a farewell that was often taken from the e-mail they received, which was acceptable. Most students understood the task that they were asked to do. Few students misunderstood the prompt and believed that they were going to be working at an animal shelter, rather than giving a monetary donation. The second question (which asked what animal they wanted to sponsor and why) allowed them to easily include personal and real reasons taken from their daily lives. Given the topic, students were also able to ask for further information easily.

Most students understood the vocabulary and the main ideas in the printed e-mail. Even if they did not understand all the vocabulary stated, they were able to infer meaning. The questions that the students were to respond to in the printed e-mail text were clear and seemingly easy to understand. Most replies did not include a lot of elaboration. In fact, most responses were straightforward and used direct questions to request details.

Some students only answered the second question partially: “What animal would you like to sponsor and why?” They sometimes only answered what animal, but did not include additional information as to why they had made that choice.

Some students asked questions that were not directly relevant to the situation due to misunderstanding part of the original e-mail and believing that they were invited to work at the animal rescue shelter.

While students mostly answered the two questions they were asked in the received e-mail, they did not always elaborate.

A few students did not use a formal register in their reply or did not consistently use a formal register.

A few students did not write in an e-mail format.

Very few students referred to the fact that they were going to be able to follow the animal of their choosing by camera.

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 train their students to read the task carefully in order to understand what they ultimately have to do (write a greeting, answer questions, ask for clarification / more information, and write a closing). Teachers also need to remind / teach students the use of appropriate, consistent formal register and that, while they do not need to elaborate on their greeting / closing, they need to elaborate on the body / main part of the task in order to have the opportunity to achieve the highest score.

Teachers should refer to AP Central for copies of released exam samples and scoring rationales to better understand how to prepare students for the Interpersonal Writing task. Teachers should consider sharing the AP Scoring Guidelines with their students as they apply them in their lesson assessment throughout the year.

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 student was asked to write a persuasive essay to submit to a Spanish writing contest, in which they were supposed to answer the question: “Is it beneficial the increasing popularity of electronic books?” The essay topic was based on three sources (two printed sources and one audio source), which presented different viewpoints and statistical information on the topic. In their persuasive essay, the student was asked to present the sources’ different viewpoints on the topic, as well as to indicate and thoroughly defend their own viewpoint using and integrating information from the three sources. The student was asked to refer to and appropriately identify information from all the sources in order to support their viewpoint. The student was asked to organize their essay into clear paragraphs.

How well did students perform on this question?

Among the Standard Group of students (those whose experience with the language has come primarily through classroom instruction), the Mean Score was 3.41 out of a possible 5 points, and the Standard Deviation was 1.00. Among the total group (all examinees), the Mean Score was 3.40, and the Standard Deviation was 1.01.

What were common student errors or omissions?

Students were able to easily answer the task / prompt / question on hand. Students were able to understand most of the information in the first source, and therefore used it significantly. They were also able to use the information from the graph although in a superficial manner in general. Students used the third source the least.

Students often did not refer to all three sources, even though the instructions required them to do so.

Some students did not write a persuasive essay in which they gave their viewpoint, but simply answered the question and included personal experiences or wrote more an argumentative essay using the information that they had read / heard in the sources. Students often answered the question by addressing the pros and cons, rather than taking a side and defending it.

To create their persuasive essay, some students compared the advantages and disadvantages of both, electronic and paper books, obtaining the information from the sources. Others focused on the information in the sources about the benefits of electronic books. Few answered the question in terms of benefits of the increase of the popularity as the question asks.

Many students misunderstood or misinterpreted the statistical information provided by the second source. Students seemed to look at the graph superficially instead of analyzing it more carefully and, for this reason, could not create good arguments from that source to support their viewpoint.

The graph in source 2 compared men and women first, then by age group; a number of students misinterpreted the information presented in the graph because they did not read the explanation at the end of the source.

Many students did not cite the sources in an appropriate manner, and in many cases just referred to some of the ideas without citing them specifically.

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 need to train students to carefully read the question first and, after reading/listening to the three sources, state a clear viewpoint. Also, teachers need to train students to be thorough when obtaining information from the sources to support their viewpoint, in other words, to get more than one idea per source so that they can develop and can integrate more information from sources. Connecting ideas is part of the integration and teachers should train students to organize a persuasive essay, as well as to cite sources properly.

Finally, teachers need to train students to interpret the information obtained, not only summarize, in order to be able to earn the highest possible score.

Teachers should refer to AP Central for copies of released exam questions and scoring rationales to better understand how to prepare students for the Presentational Writing task. Teachers should consider sharing the AP Scoring Guidelines with their students as they apply them in their lesson assessment throughout the year.

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.

The course theme for the task was Contemporary Life. In this task, the student was required to have a conversation with Sonia, a friend, about community volunteering opportunities. The student was asked to perform different linguistic skills such as maintaining the conversation, responding to questions, elaborating with details and eliciting questions.

How well did students perform on this question?

Among the Standard Group of students (those whose experience with the language has come primarily through classroom instruction), the Mean Score was 3.15 out of a possible 5 points, and the Standard Deviation was 1.27. Among the total group (all examinees), the Mean Score was 4.08, and the Standard Deviation was 1.26.

What were common student errors or omissions?

This year some students struggled with prompt 1; in the outline the students were informed about possible activities regarding community service and the prompt referred to a *fiesta* that took place the evening prior. The question inquired about the party and the interlocutor explained the reason for not being able to attend;

a community service project. “*Hola, siento haberme perdido tu fiesta de cumpleaños. Ese día me tocó trabajar como voluntaria en el centro social, ¿cómo estuvo la fiesta?*” Although some students struggled with this first prompt, it did not prevent them from responding well to the other parts of the conversation.

Prompt 5 asked students if they had any further questions; “*¿Y qué más quisieras saber sobre el centro?*” This was also somewhat problematic for some students, as they might not have been expecting to ask a question.

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?

Throughout the year, teachers should be working with students to develop interpersonal speaking skills. This task should be practiced often in class, simulating the testing conditions. The students should have to respond spontaneously and should reflect a plethora of different scenarios and opportunities for students to develop advanced circumlocutions and vocabulary skills.

Teachers should also adhere to the 20-second limitation that will be required for responding to these prompts. Teachers should provide students with opportunities to learn and use advanced vocabulary words as well as transition words that extend conversations. This task should be scaffolded to all levels of language instruction in order to provide all students the opportunity to develop the Interpersonal Mode of Communication. Teachers should provide and develop all types of opportunities that require students to participate in this mode of communication.

Lastly, AP teachers should work with the AP coordinator to ensure that all those involved in the process (e.g., students, proctors, and technology personnel) are familiar with the test instructions, the operation of the equipment, and the recording process to be sure that students’ responses are recorded properly. Practice sessions should allow students to record their responses digitally and save them as MP3 files. This is important since all submissions, beginning in 2017, will be digital and will be uploaded instead of burning individual CDs.

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

“*¿Qué tipo de eventos o actividades se consideran una expresión de la identidad cultural en tu comunidad?*” was this year’s topic. To complete this task the students were required to demonstrate their understanding of the cultural features of the Spanish-speaking world. The question focused on two parts: the first asked about what types of events or activities are an expression of cultural identity and the second asked students to compare their observations — through their own studies or personal experiences — about their home communities with those of a region in the Spanish-speaking world.

How well did students perform on this question?

Among the Standard Group of students (those whose experience with the language has come primarily through classroom instruction), the Mean Score was 3.26 out of a possible 5 points, and the Standard Deviation was 1.20. Among the total group (all examinees), the Mean Score was 3.27, and the Standard Deviation was 1.35.

What were common student errors or omissions?

Many students identified an event or an activity, however, they did not elaborate on how it was an expression of cultural identity. Some responses were sweeping generalizations about the topic without making a true connection between the event/activity and cultural identity. Those students that were able to elaborate and provide specific details were able to score in the high range. Many responses did not clearly establish the two communities being compared, or only spoke of one community, thus meaning that the students gave a cultural presentation rather than a comparison. A few students erroneously focused on the curricular theme instead of the prompt itself. In this question, the students needed to respond to the question of events and activities through the lens of cultural identity. Some of the topics presented this year were about sports, customs and traditions, and holidays. Some students elected more abstract ideas such as music, art, and literature. Teachers need to keep in mind that all of these ideas can be tied to cultural identity since each one at some moment in time has been connected to an event; a student cannot compare *Don Quixote* to *The Great Gatsby* if he or she has not read the novels at some point. These types of responses opened the door to a plethora of opportunities for students, as long as they described how the event or activity was an expression of cultural identity.

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?

It is important that teachers continue to develop and practice this skill of making cultural comparisons at all levels of language learning so that students familiarize themselves with this task. The notion of scaffolding this task is imperative, as students must demonstrate their knowledge of the topic based on what they have studied in class. Students should have the opportunity to practice often, recording themselves where their actual exam will take place. This will allow them to feel comfortable with both the task and the environment when they sit for the exam.

Instruct and encourage students to elaborate their responses by providing relevant, supporting details. Also focus on good organizational skills; this will enable students to present a much more cohesive cultural comparison. Teach students to use transition words in order to help them better generate their ideas and organize their presentation. In class, use graphic organizers, such as a t-chart, to help students focus on both their community and the target language community. Encourage students to make bulleted lists rather than writing out or scripting their entire sentences. Provide students with many different types of formative and summative assessments that require them to prepare for a presentation within a certain time limit. Begin with shorter presentations and work your way to a two-minute cultural comparison. Use the scoring guidelines in class to assess these activities and teach students how to assess their own work. If a student can understand the components of a high score this will enable them to focus on those characteristics and provide a much better response.