



Student Performance Q&A: 2016 AP[®] United States History Free-Response Questions

The following comments on the 2016 free-response questions for AP[®] United States History were written by the Chief Reader, Jonathan Chu of the University of Massachusetts Boston. 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.

Short Answer Question 1

What was the intent of this question?

This question asked students to evaluate a graph that depicts the rapid rise of immigration between 1820 and 1859 in order to explain what groups immigrated and what pushed and pulled them to the United States. Additionally, students were asked to briefly explain two historical effects of the immigration depicted (tasks b and c). The question assessed the historical thinking skill related to causation through both the evaluation of the graph and the explanation of historical effects. It additionally required students to evaluate and use historical information from across Period 4 (1800–1844) and Period 5 (1844–1877).

How well did students perform on this question?

The mean score on Short Answer Question 1 was 1.65 out of a possible 3 points.

This question is a very mainstream question with the graph of increasing immigration between 1820 and 1859 as a helpful prompt for students to address the question. Respondents generally appeared to know and successfully explain the reasons for immigration within their answers. The focus in the first part was primarily on the notion of Irish fleeing the potato famine and Germans fleeing religious persecution and regional conflicts. The responses also frequently made use of job opportunities in the Northeast due to industrialization and urbanization as a prime motivating factor for the increases in immigration depicted. Although the historical effects called for in both tasks (b) and (c) were slightly more problematic for students, many responses were able to effectively explain one or both effects. Some common examples of information used by students in their explanation of historical effect would include the idealized notions of republicanism in the United States, discussions of nativism, and the various impacts related to immigration into urban areas. The mainstream and straightforward nature of the question combined with the very straightforward graph meant that students performed at a fairly high level on this question overall.

What were common student errors or omissions?

The most common errors or omissions found in these student responses were related to not having a strong concept of the periods identified in the graph. This often led to a confusion of the different waves of immigration that have occurred in the United States. A significant number of responses dealt with new immigrant groups that were not yet prevalent in the time periods. This often led students to attempt to respond to the question from outside the appropriate time period. A smaller number of responses tended to focus too intently on industrialization (Robber Barons, Standard Oil, Andrew Carnegie) and labor unions (Knights of Labor, American Federation of Labor, Great Railroad General Strike, Haymarket, Homestead) without enough explanation as to how these might be an historical effect of the immigration depicted in the graph. Students who were cognizant of the correct time period being addressed who were not led astray by other immigrant groups were generally able to provide clear and relatively concise 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?

With Short Answer Question 1, we found that in general students were familiar with the content needed to address the prompt. The primary exceptions to this were when students failed to remain within the timeframe identified by the graph. It is clear that teachers are addressing the concepts and relevant historical evidence that is necessary to answer this question. We often found that it was a fundamental lack of understanding in how the short-answer responses are structured that led to substantive problems with the responses.

Fundamentally, when reading the response to Short Answer 1 it was found that students consistently need more exposure to the format and types of questions that are present in the short-answer section. It appears that many students have had limited practice with the particular requirements of this format and that often affects their ability to respond adequately to the prompts. It would be beneficial for teachers to give particular attention to the following in their courses. Teachers should focus on training students to read the short-answer questions carefully by paying particular attention to what the students are being asked to provide in each section. It is important that teachers continue to practice questions and formats throughout the school year so students are familiar with the format and various question structures of the short-answer section. Additionally, this practice would be extremely beneficial to ensure students are able to read and interpret graphs and identify the specifics of the time period from the provided image.

As students practice, teachers should ensure that students are able to not only provide historical details but to also tie these details clearly to the effects the question is asking them to explain. The examples should be as clear and specific as possible so that the raters are not forced to speculate as to the student's intent in addressing the prompt. Although we clearly do not expect these to be fully developed essays, writing in complete and coherent sentences that transition well can help the student to accurately address the prompts. There is some tendency among students to bullet point their answers in sentence form and this is often insufficient for achieving the point for each section. The use of extensive quotations or simply paraphrasing the information provided in a graph is often detrimental to the student's responses. Students should demonstrate their understanding of the prompt and an appropriate response to the prompt in their own words without a heavy reliance on the wording of the graph or other documents provided.

Short Answer Question 2

What was the intent of this question?

The intent of this question was to test the content knowledge of the students from Period 2, specifically the goals of the Spanish and the English with regard to colonization before 1700. The historical thinking skill that was assessed with this question was comparison. Students were asked to compare and contrast goals of the two European powers, then offer an extension of that development with regard to the differences.

How well did students perform on this question?

The mean score on Short Answer Question 2 was 1.61 out of a possible 3 points.

In general, students seemed to handle this question pretty well. Most responses scored at least a 1 and very few students were not able to come up with something.

Students seemed to do best on task (a), which asked for similarities of goals of the Spanish and English with regard to colonization before 1700. Students were able to recognize at least one goal that both European powers shared and were able to provide a brief explanation of that goal. The goals could be general in nature, such as, desire to acquire wealth, increase power, promote religion, etc., but in order to get the point the goal must come with a brief explanation of how colonization would help in achieving that goal. We did notice that those students who were able to complete (b) successfully, which asked for differences in goals between the Spanish and the English, normally were able to offer an extension of the development of the differences, which was the task in (c). For the most part, if students did (b) successfully, they often did (c) successfully as well. Thus, it was difficult to find responses that scored a 2. In some cases we did find responses which did not get the (b) point, but did get the (c) point.

What were common student errors or omissions?

In general, students struggled with the (b) and (c) tasks. Task (b) asked students to identify a difference in goals between the Spanish and English with regard to colonization before 1700 and then provide a brief explanation. The most common mistake with student responses was not to identify a goal, but offer a description of the differences between the two (e.g., in the New England colonies many came over as families and the Spanish came over as singles). If there was no clear differentiation with regard to a goal, accompanied with an explanation, then students did not receive this point. It was possible for students to not receive the (b) point, but receive the (c) point. If the difference in goals was not clear enough to grant the point for (b), but the student did a good job with the development, or effect of that difference, then the response could earn the (c) point. In a few instances, we did encounter a response that did not elaborate enough in the explanation to get the (b) point, but extended the explanation in (c), that we were able to grant the (b) point for the extension of the explanation.

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?

First, practice short-answer questions as much as you can. I would recommend using these as a writing warm-up exercise the first 10 minutes of class. These are quick and easy, but unless students practice these they won't really know how to attack them. Since these are fundamentally different from the other writing components of the exam, it is important that students feel comfortable and confident with these.

Second, many of these questions will call for specifics. This particular prompt did not, but many do. If students are asked to provide specific historical information, they need to provide information that is of a specific nature. Making generic historical generalizations will often not be enough to get the point. I have my

students answer these questions with the following formula: proper noun plus an explanation connecting the specific detail to the task of the question.

Third, there is no advantage to the student to label their responses versus just writing them in one paragraph form. Labeling them will not penalize the student, even if they accidentally put the wrong information in the wrong place. As with other parts of the exam, it is the raters' job to reward students for what they know and what they do right.

Fourth, these short-answer questions give the students the opportunity to work with the historical-thinking skills in a manageable way. I would suggest getting creative with these when designing them yourself. Make sure that you are varying the different kinds of skills each day so the students get used to the different ways that these types of questions can be asked. It is very important that students practice with the Historical Interpretation SAQ, as this will show up on every form of the AP[®] U.S. History Exam.

Short Answer Question 3

What was the intent of this question?

This question allowed students to compare two excerpts from secondary sources, one written by Matthew Josephson and the other by H.W. Brands, historians who have written on the industrialists of the late-nineteenth century. The question assessed the historical thinking skill of interpretation. Referring to the excerpts, the question asked students to explain a significant difference between Josephson's and Brands's understanding of late-nineteenth century industrialists (task a) and then to explain how examples of a historical person, event, or development in the period from 1865 to 1900 could be used to support each interpretation (tasks b and c).

How well did students perform on this question?

The mean score on Short Answer Question 3 was 1.54 out of a possible 3 points.

Students generally performed well on this question as they displayed a familiarity with the challenges and opportunities of the Second Industrial Revolution and the Gilded Age. While many responses provided adequate interpretations, many others simply argued that according to Josephson "robber barons" were bad, and that according to Brands "Captains of Industry" were good. Most students provided appropriate examples and an explanation of a person, event or development for task (b) but had more difficulty providing an appropriate example and explanation for task (c). A fair number of students in explaining the event/development analyzed the difference in the views and thus earned the point for (a) while addressing (b) and (c).

What were common student errors or omissions?

Responses quoted from the excerpts in the hope that juxtaposing quotations satisfied the requirements for describing the difference between the views.

Students frequently characterized the excerpts simplistically, say that that according to Josephson "robber barons" were bad, and that according to Brands "Captains of Industry" were good.

Students presented evidence outside of the time range particularly for (b) and (c) in which responses often ranged into the twentieth century. There were frequent mentions of Henry Ford implementing the moving assembly line, for example.

Responses often introduced examples of persons, events, or developments that were appropriate, but failed to explain the connection to the interpretations. For example, many students introduced the example of Boss

Tweed in support of the Josephson interpretation, but merely described the political concentration of power with no reference to big business.

Perhaps the most common error was the use of examples for part (c) that simply reiterated the Josephson interpretation from part (b). Many students used the example of horizontal or vertical integration as a development that supported Josephson, and then argued that the other supported Brands.

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 already discourage quotation and encourage interpretation of the documents in DBQ preparation. Teachers should apply the same energy and strategies to short-answer questions with excerpts. Stress to students that restatement of the question or excerpt does not constitute a response that will earn the point.

Stress that when the prompt asks students to “briefly explain” as this prompt did, a simple identification or list will not suffice. Explanation requires students to make explicit connections between the example given and the interpretations of the excerpts.

Emphasize that students should address each part of the question directly rather than attempting to write in an essay format with introduction and conclusion due to the time limitations of the short-answer question.

Model short-answer question responses and give students practice not only writing responses but scoring them. In scoring, students will see the advantage to finding the tasks completed in sequence. Such an exercise may convince the students that they earn credit for what they know when they respond discretely to each question part with explanations rather than in a “data dump” of facts.

Short Answer Question 4

What was the intent of this question?

This question asked students to identify distinct factors that resulted in increased tensions between Great Britain and its North American colonies in the period 1763–1776 and then briefly explain how each factor helped lead to the American Revolution. The question assessed the historical thinking skill of historical causation, and the content covered Period 3, which ranges from 1754 to 1800. Repeating the “identify and briefly explain” tasks in a, b, and c, the question asked for cause (event or historical development) and effect (increased tensions that lead to the American Revolution) relationships in a historical context.

How well did students perform on this question?

The mean score on Short Answer Question 4 was 1.67 out of a possible 3 points.

Students performed well on this mainstream question about a topic covered in every survey of United States History, the coming of the American Revolution. Almost all students named events in the time period and most then explained how they increased tensions by linking to a factor such as changing British mercantile policy or “no taxation without representation.” Finally many then tied those increased tensions between Great Britain and its North American colonies to the coming of the American Revolution.

By and large, students understood the aftermath of the French and Indian War. Besides connecting it to the end of “salutary neglect,” students also displayed a good understanding of the Proclamation of 1763 and colonial reaction to it as well as to the continued presence of a British military force. Because the time period extended to 1776, some responses effectively used the Battles of Lexington and Concord, the Second Continental Congress, the Olive Branch Petition, the publication of *Common Sense*, and/or the Declaration of

Independence in their identification of factors increasing tensions and explanation of how they helped lead to revolution.

The question allowed for students to identify taxes as factors and earn points separately for different explanations of reactions to them. While most responses focused on events such as enactment of the Stamp Act, the Boston Massacre, and/or Boston Tea Party, these responses earned the task point when they used these events as examples that built the tensions leading to revolution. Strong responses addressed causation discretely in (a), (b), and (c) and referred to economic, political, military, ideological, and/or emerging colonial identity factors, some with sophisticated yet concise analysis of how each increased tensions and led to the American Revolution.

What were common student errors or omissions?

In (a), (b), and (c), the question required identification and explanation tasks. Students who wrote one long paragraph, rather than a labeled three-part response sometimes lost track of one of the three factors.

Some students struggled with meeting the explanation requirement in each task as they provided a proper noun such as Sugar Act with description but no explanation of how it increased tensions between Great Britain and its North American colonies. Weaker responses referred to how different historical events in (a), (b), and (c) "made the colonists angry and wanting independence." Though the explanations for each task could be similar, they could not be identical. Responses thus had to explain briefly distinct colonial reactions to the events in the historical context of leading to the American Revolution. Many students stumbled in following up identification with explanation.

A common error was placing the enactment of the Navigation Acts after the French and Indian War. Some responses injected events and developments leading to the War of 1812 in the colonial context.

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?

Another year's experience with the short-answer questions reinforces how they differ from the essays. Although students who understood chronology and context embedded them in their explanations of what led to the American Revolution, this question allowed students to hopscotch chronology from (a) to (b) to (c) as long as identification and explanation appeared in each part.

Those teachers who separate short-answer practice from essay writing establish the skills differences between the two question formats. Warm-up exercises that challenge students to respond quickly in one or two well-crafted sentences per task in short-answer questions appropriate for the class coverage that day prepare students for the roughly 12-minute per question format of the short-answer questions. Concise, directed responses to (a), (b), and (c) earn the point for each.

CAVEATS on the MECHANICS of TAKING the EXAM

Teachers already prepare students for exam questions with many practice opportunities, but the protocol of test-taking continues to be a point of emphasis. Though everyone at the AP[®] Reading works tirelessly to guarantee that each student response receives a thorough read and fair score, the transition to digitized short-answer responses places even more importance on students' writing in dark ink within the designated area for that question to ensure that the scanned responses are complete and legible.

Thinking outside of the box is optional but responding inside the box is essential. Teachers will choose whatever delivery mode works best for that message of highlighting for students the importance of following instructions: write each response legibly in the short-answer booklet in the box provided for it.

Those participating in the AP[®] Reading see how students who answer Question 1 in the Question 4 box, respond to multiple questions in one box, scribble in the margins, or choose any other non-standard possibility introduce the same complications in the online world as they do in the physical booklet one: responses must be deferred from the regular scoring queue to a special one that requires repeated laborious hand-offs to insure that each response is scored.

Question 1—Document-Based Question

What was the intent of this question?

The intent of this question was for students to explain the causes of the rise of the women's rights movement from 1940 to 1975. Students could choose these causes so there were many different avenues students could take to answer this question effectively.

How well did students perform on this question?

The mean score on the Document-Based Question was 2.29 out of a possible 7 points.

Most students seemed to be able to construct a clear thesis that addressed the question. Also, most students seemed to know some information from the time period to include in their essays. In particular, most students were able to add historical context to Document 2, with a discussion of Betty Friedan as the author of *The Feminine Mystique* and historical context to Document 7 with a discussion of *Roe v. Wade*. Most students were able to use the content from Documents 1, 2, 4, and 7 quite well to support their thesis or argument. Most students wrote fairly long responses to this question and really attempted to follow the directions. There were many more attempts to source the documents and to add a synthesis argument than last year.

What were common student errors or omissions?

Documents 3, 5, and 6 were problematic for many students. For Document 3, many students read the word "caste" from the source line and took a very convoluted approach to the document. For Document 5, many students seemed unaware of La Raza, were confused about the definition of Chicanas, and thought that the La Raza movement was a movement in Mexico, not the United States. For both of these documents, students missed the point of women being discriminated against even inside these civil rights organizations. For Document 6, most students either quoted the document at length or else misinterpreted Title IX as allowing girls to attend school. As for omissions, many students missed the points for Contextualization, Evidence Beyond the Documents, and Synthesis. For all three of these points, many students may have thought they were fulfilling the instructions for these points, but students generally did not clearly situate their argument, use evidence to support or qualify their argument, or appropriately extend their argument to another historical time period, situation, or geographic area. Instead, many students added a fact or idea that could have been an excellent beginning to earning these points, but the students never developed these ideas and failed to clearly connect these ideas to their 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?

Teachers should have students practice writing passages that could earn the points of Contextualization, Evidence Beyond the Documents, and Synthesis. These points are not awarded for "name-dropping," but rather for situating, supporting, or extending their argument. These points cannot be earned for a phrase, but rather for a fully developed explanation that may require several sentences to a paragraph.

Long Essay Question 2

What was the intent of this question?

This question allowed students to evaluate the extent to which the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Amendments marked a turning point in the history of United States politics and society, explaining what changed and what stayed the same from the period immediately before the amendments to the period immediately following them. The question assessed the historical thinking skill of periodization and covered Period 5, which ranges from 1844 to 1877, and Period 6, which ranges from 1865 to 1898.

How well did students perform on this question?

The mean score on Long Essay Question 2 was 2.04 out of a possible 6 points. Overall, the students demonstrated a sense of the relevant content, but struggled to fully answer all parts of the question. For students who did understand the time period, specific content knowledge was utilized in appropriate manner relevant to the question. Commonly seen specific evidence for the support of arguments included: black codes, Jim Crow laws, *Plessy v. Ferguson*, literacy tests, poll taxes, and grandfather clauses.

The majority of students understood that the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Amendments had a limited impact in the post-Reconstruction era. Students did have some difficulty with addressing all parts of the question and there was an unequal treatment of the before and after aspects required for the historical thinking skill of periodization.

What were common student errors or omissions?

Common content errors included confusion on the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Amendments; many students stated that these amendments abolished slavery and/or gave voting rights to women and that they were “passed” by Lincoln. Another common error was treating black codes and Jim Crow laws as the same concept. There was also confused chronology and incorrect periodization; frequently students wrote almost exclusively about the Civil Rights Movement in the twentieth century and skipped periodization as it related to the period of the Amendments. Also related to the difficulty of periodization, there was frequently a lack of a discussion from the period prior to the Amendments or a failure to discuss similarities from before or after the Amendments.

Common writing errors included a lack of a thesis which addressed all parts of the question (politics and society were often not specifically addressed). While students did attempt synthesis more frequently than in years past, they frequently failed to include an explanation of the connections between their thesis and the extension of the argument being made.

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 work with students on dissecting questions to not only better identify the type of question (in this case a periodization question that was often mistaken for a continuity and change question), but also how to frame the thesis statement to capture the dissected elements of the question. Teachers should continue to emphasize the writing of complex thesis statements that address all parts of the question. There should also be a reminder that the thesis statement should focus the response on the question asked; synthesis arguments presented in the thesis statement do not count as an extension of the argument when discussed later in the response.

Teachers need to ensure that their students understand that “Evaluate the extent” calls for the student to make a qualitative or quantitative statement to address the prompt. “Turning point” means that the prompt is a periodization prompt, and the additional language regarding differences and similarities are not intended

to be continuity and change over time prompts. Before writing, students should think about the periods before and after the period identified in the prompt and describe differences and similarities from one period to the next.

Essays should not sacrifice good writing in the hope of getting a score point, especially in the synthesis dimension. The condition precedent for synthesis requires the student to write a “coherent and persuasive essay.” The “laundry list” of evidence is not as effective as a few examples that are well-explained and utilized in a persuasive argument.

Long Essay Question 3

What was the intent of this question?

This question allowed students to evaluate the extent to which United States participation in the First World War (1917–1918) marked a turning point in the nation’s role in world affairs, analyzing what changed and what stayed the same from the period immediately before the war to the period immediately after. The question assessed the historical thinking skill of periodization and covered Period 7, which ranges from 1890 to 1945.

How well did students perform on this question?

The mean score on Long Essay Question 3 was 2.04 out of a possible 6 points.

The readers of this question noted that essays tended towards descriptive narratives rather than analytical or argumentative essays. Sound student responses provided an evaluative thesis statement noting “how much” of a turning point the First World War was in the nation’s role in world affairs. Students generally had a basic understanding of the First World War with Woodrow Wilson, the Fourteen Points, and the Versailles Treaty constituting the most popular evidence. Students discussed policies of isolation and intervention, addressing the degree to which each position influenced United States involvement in world affairs. High-scoring answers provided an accurate chronology of events immediately before and immediately after the First World War with emphasis on how the various events related to United States involvement in world affairs. Students used explanations of these events in order to analyze similarities and differences before and/or after the war. The best evidence provided clear linkages to the thesis statement. Many students did not clearly define similarities and differences before and/or after the war as requested in the prompt and thus missed periodization points.

What were common student errors or omissions?

THESIS

By far, the most common error was that students simply restated the question, asserting that the First World War constituted a turning point in the nation’s role in world affairs, without including an evaluative statement required by the prompt. However, students generally made a historically defensible claim and provided a framework for responding to all parts of the question. A good number of students understood that a viable thesis was to state that the First World War was not a turning point and to provide an alternative turning point.

APPLICATION OF HISTORICAL THINKING SKILL/PERIODIZATION

The highest scoring responses analyzed similarities and differences before and/or following the war with specific examples. When responses did not receive points on this dimension, it was because they did not clearly trace similarities or differences, either before or after the war. Confused chronology also made it difficult for readers to determine how well the students understood periodization.

ARGUMENTATION/USE OF EVIDENCE

Essays most frequently made errors on the following:

- Making a direct connection between the sinking of the *Lusitania* (1915) and United States entry into the First World War because of unrestricted submarine warfare (1917)
- Confusing key leaders and events of the First and Second World Wars, i.e., Theodore Roosevelt, Woodrow Wilson, Franklin Roosevelt, Harry Truman, Adolf Hitler, Pearl Harbor, Imperial Japan, the Soviet Union, etc.
- Concentrating on American perspectives and the United States position within the global framework rather than on the nation's role in world affairs
- Listing an abundance of names and events without constructing a qualitative, argumentative essay that addressed the question
- Failing to restrict the focus to events immediately before and after the First World War, thereby spanning the breadth of U.S. history from George Washington's Farewell Address, the War of 1812, and the Monroe Doctrine to the Korean and Vietnam Wars, United States involvement in Iraq and Afghanistan, and the War Against Terror
- Ending too soon, i.e., merely mentioning key leaders or events without providing thorough discussion and explanation of their impact on United States involvement in world affairs
- Demonstrating a general lack of knowledge regarding the chronology of events, especially whether they were before or after the First World War

SYNTHESIS

Students either made no attempt at synthesis or failed to relate their discussion to the thesis or to extend the argument. Better essays included a separate paragraph that employed an additional category of analysis (e.g., political, economic, social, cultural, geographic, racial, or gender-oriented) or connected United States involvement in the First World War to the nation's role in world affairs in another historical period, area, context, or circumstance.

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?

In short, answer the question asked, not the one you (the student or the teacher) wished had been asked. Please teach students to do the following:

- Read the entire question including the specific instructions about what to include and how to craft a response.
- Do not rely on the traditional five-paragraph format that includes three main points, e.g., political, economic, social. Use an appropriate essay structure that addresses all parts of the question.
- Write an explicit thesis in the opening paragraph with explanation or context; many efforts at writing a thesis simply rephrased the question.
- Follow the rubric that will be used to score the essay, particularly the qualitative elements.

- Manage the time allocation on each section of the exam by practicing timed essays in class. Many students seemed to have run out of time trying to complete the second essay.
- Do not underline the thesis statement as sometimes the wrong part of the essay is underlined.
- Use synthesis as an integral part of the essay, not a sentence added at the end of the essay (many students did not attempt any form of synthesis).

For teachers:

- Use the Curriculum Framework for course structure and pacing.
- If at all possible, participate in the AP[®] Reading. At a minimum, attend an AP[®] Summer Institute. First-hand experience with the scoring standards is critical to preparing students fully for the AP[®] Exam.