

Chief Reader Report on Student Responses: 2018 AP[®] English Language and Composition Free-Response Questions

• Number of Students Scored	580,043		
• Number of Readers	1,570		
• Score Distribution	Exam Score	N	%At
	5	61,523	10.6
	4	102,953	17.7
	3	167,131	28.8
	2	169,858	29.3
	1	78,578	13.5
• Global Mean	2.83		

The following comments on the 2018 free-response questions for AP[®] English Language were written by the Chief Reader, Elizabethada A. Wright, Professor, University of Minnesota Duluth. 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 preparation 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.

Question #1**Task:** Synthesis**Topic:** Eminent Domain**Max. Points:** 9**Mean Score:** 4.58***What were the responses to this question expected to demonstrate?***

This year’s synthesis question asked students to use material from the six provided sources and write a “well-developed essay that defends, challenges, or qualifies the notion that eminent domain is productive and beneficial.” To achieve this task, students needed to read all the sources, drawing support from the information to write their essay.

To do well, students were expected to understand that they were, in essence, creating an argument using the supplied information, as well as knowledge that they already possessed. Students also needed to understand that, with sources arguing among one another, students did not have to accept each source as “correct,” but rather, they needed to evaluate the provided information based on their own knowledge and perceptions of the world.

Responses were expected to integrate the information from the sources with the students’ positions, not merely repeat the information. Therefore, students were expected to understand how to integrate the support for competing arguments into their own.

How well did the response address the course content related to this question? How well did the responses integrate the skills required on this question?

The foundation of the AP English Language and Composition course is argumentation, and many students successfully created strong arguments. Additionally, the language of the prompt appeared to be easily accessible to students, and the sources informed the topic well and, despite their collective length, were also accessible to students who generally used them to their advantage. By and large, students engaged in a larger conversation about various successes and failures of eminent domain, as well as about various motivations that inform local or federal decisions regarding the practice.

While the language was accessible, students seemed to lack familiarity with the topic, and many struggled. The struggles suggest many classes are not asking students to engage in subjects that are not within teenagers’ immediate concerns. As a result of this lack, many students merely repeated the provided information, not interrogating it or using it as a means to support their own claim.

Lower range responses (1-4) generally saw the issue as a clear-cut binary: They seemed to contend that eminent domain was either absolutely all bad or absolutely all good, with very little room for nuance or complexity. These responses relied heavily on source material that ranged from copying sources verbatim to inadequately using source material to support an insufficient argument. Common among these was the decision to either keep or get rid of eminent domain. Also popular were various theories about the evils of government in general that included oversimplification such as “eminent domain is communist!” Also in this range were essays that offered incorrect reading of the sources (“eminent domain is unconstitutional”), or clever but unsuccessful evasion of the question. Some were marked with good ideas, but failed to reference or cite sources accurately. Some student responses relied on plagiarism.

Mid-range responses (5-7) were generally more successful in their approach to the prompt. They too often included binary responses that presented eminent domain as something that can be good but also can be bad; however, these responses also presented more qualified discussions that included the extent to which eminent domain is good and bad. They were sometimes marked with astute observation, such as: “At least the wolf knocks on the pig’s door before threatening to blow their houses down. Walmart just had the government send the pigs a letter full of legal jargon and a foreboding future full of unpayable legal bill [*sic*].” These responses were able to articulate a distinction between the theory and practice of eminent domain. Most of these distinctions seemed to extend from students’ inferences that there was something necessary about eminent

domain even if many situations during which it is exercised prove problematic. Student responses also generally provided summary of the sources, but adequately developed an argument to go along with this. They offered varying degrees of explanation of these arguments (“Eminent domain has good and bad qualities . . . I think it’s bad . . . the end”), but they did so in a limited, sufficient, or more complete manner.

The highest scoring essays (8-9) presented nuanced positions that addressed the complexity of the issue. They used the sources, the issue, their knowledge of history, and their power of observation in more balanced and well-reasoned conversations. These responses fully understood the topic and sources, and they presented effective thinking and writing. Students provided interesting and engaging examples of eminent domain from their own experiences and observations to complement the information in the sources. They often explained their position through thinking about scenarios outside of the reading, but also effectively synthesized source material in a much more economical way. These responses invoked political philosophy and their knowledge of this country’s founding to engage in a wide range of important and critical discussions about the topic.

What common student misconceptions or gaps in knowledge were seen in the responses to this question?

<i>Common Misconceptions/Knowledge Gaps</i>	<i>Responses that Demonstrate Understanding</i>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Students assume they need to use information from each source in their responses. The task asks that they cite information from at least three sources. Students are welcome to include citations from more, but what they do not need to do is provide their audience with a “tour” of the sources. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> An essay that cites only three sources, using them only as necessary to create an adequate argument.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Students often assume that quoting the sources is sufficient. Students need to use the information from the sources as a means of supporting their own arguments. Sometimes, referencing one of the sources’ information is sufficient; students would better use their time constructing their own logic than in copying provided information. 	<p>“Eminent domain is used to ‘facilitate transportation, supply water, construct public buildings, and aid in defense readiness’ (U.S. Department of Justice). Eminent domain gives the government the assurance that when it plans to construct infrastructure of our systems that improve the state of the country and promote policy, that it does not encounter any roadblocks. Otherwise, it would find itself much like the American Articles of Confederation, where the government had not ability to assert power or sustain itself.”</p> <p>Here, the student does provide a quote; however, the student does not assume the quote speaks for itself, moving to interpret the quote, comparing the United States’ current system of government to that of the Articles of the Confederation.</p>

- Some students assume that asserting a position and then summarizing the provided source that supports the position is sufficient. The exam question provides sources that offer a range of support for the posed prompt; students need to argue why their one position is better than others.

“However, characterizing eminent domain by its small-scale failures ignores its larger more ubiquitous implications. If not for eminent domain, governments would be able to do little other than draft legislation and arm officials to enforce that legislation. Instead, they have an additional opportunity to exact change, and do so in a way that is constructive for the community at large.”

This response acknowledges the validity of one position but moves to illustrate why another is preferable.

“Many times, the intensions to revitalize are backed by ‘corporatism: the belief that government and business should work together.’ (Source B) This belief often leads to the neglect of these area which are targeted . . .

While ‘overt racism is rarely a factor in modern takings,’ it is clear that ‘unconscious bias plays a role.’ (Source C) . . . Often times, the counterargument to the use of eminent domain is that the people whose homes have been taken from them will have a new benefit to look forward . . . but when your home has been taken from you, the prospect of a highway will not compensate for that loss. Another counterargument may be that there is adequate payment for those who have lost their homes, yet this is false. In many cases, homeowners are compensated for hundreds of thousands of dollars less than they should be, and the individual financial loss is wildly high (Source F).”

This student provides counterarguments while supporting their position.

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Many students do not take the time to read the sources clearly, often citing the sources incorrectly. 	<p>“Eminent Domain violates the right to private property. The 5th ammendment [<i>sic</i>] to our constitution states that private property will not ‘be taken for public use, without just compensation.’ (source A) How can we argue that Eminent Domain is ‘by the book’ if former owners are rarely compensated fairly? While there certainly are cases in which there is fair compensation and the end product is positive, sources show that this is often not the case.”</p> <p>Instead of incorrectly stating (as do many students) that eminent domain is counter to the Constitution, this student argues that many usages of eminent domain violate the Constitution’s text. Therefore, the student shows that while eminent domain does not violate the Constitution in theory, it does violate it in practice.</p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Students often do not recognize nuance within the provided sources. They need to see not only what the provided arguments claim, but the context in which these arguments were created. 	<p>“Early in our nation’s history, the federal government used this power to ‘facilitate transportation, supply water, construct public buildings, and aid in defense readiness’ (Source A). Also, eminent domain was used to create ‘federal parks, preserve historic sites, and monuments’ (Source A). Perhaps this was necessary in our country’s beginnings. However, now that we already have land set aside for public use, is it really necessary to continue forcing people off their private land?</p> <p>This student recognizes the validity of eminent domain in the context in which it was created; however, the writer questions the use within a modern context.</p>

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Students tend to create their arguments within a binary, as if the responses to the issues are either all good or all bad. Students need to recognize that most contested issues are contested because there often is sound support for all sides of the issue (e.g., eminent domain has value; however, the implementation of it often creates problems). Weighing the value of the support for each side and making an argument of value regarding these means of support is a sound way of creating a sophisticated argument regarding such issues. 	<p>“These occasional failures [of eminent domain] are overshadowed by the resounding successes of many of the larger, often nationwide attempts of the government to construct a much-needed infrastructure, and to tangibly alter the course of the nation in a way that cannot be done with just pen and paper. Although eminent domain can be misused to benefit private investors at the expense of citizens, it is a vital tool of the government that intends to have any influence on the land it governs beyond the written law.”</p> <p>This writer acknowledge the benefits and evils of eminent domain, spending a majority of the essay illustrating why the benefits outweigh the evils.</p>
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Based on your experience at the AP® Reading with student responses, what advice would you offer to teachers to help them improve the student performance on the exam?

1. Teachers need to ask their students to read more (especially nonfiction), and to read critically. To write well, one must be able to read critically. Classes should interrogate other people’s arguments, looking at the information used to support the people’s positions and asking what assumptions are made by these people to connect their information to their claims.

There are two ways teachers can do more of this. First, teachers can ask students to read more on issues outside of their immediate concerns. Second, students can start using rhetorical analysis to investigate other people’s arguments: Look at how arguments are structured; what kinds of sources are used to support claims; what assumptions are the arguments making to connect the sources to the claim; is there emotion used to persuade audiences?

2. Teachers can continue to invite students to recognize nuance in issues. One great benefit of practicing debate is that students are often asked to create arguments for issues they disagree with. This practice is something students need to do more of. With this practice, teachers need to lead students to recognize that very few issues involve good/bad binaries; there are benefits to all the positions. However, teachers need to help students see that the lack of binaries does not mean all issues are relative. Instead, there are degrees of value to all positions that students must weigh in order to create sophisticated arguments.
3. Teachers also need to recognize that although the AP English Language Exam Question 1 is termed the “synthesis” question, it is still very much an argument and all the skills necessary for Question 3 (the argument question) need to be used in this essay.
4. Teachers should refer to past Chief Reader Reports regarding advice; they are very relevant.

Question #2**Task:** Synthesis**Topic:** Albright commencement speech**Max. Points:** 9**Mean Score:** 4.54***What were the responses to this question expected to demonstrate?***

This year’s rhetorical analysis question asked students to identify and evaluate the rhetorical choices made in a commencement address, specifically a speech by Madeleine Albright to the graduating class of 1997 at Mount Holyoke College. As in past years, this year’s prompt asked students to consider the rhetorical situation a speaker faces and analyze the choices that the speaker makes in order to elicit appropriate or desirable responses from an audience.

Also as in past years, the prompt provided students with key historical information and context. For students who may not have known anything about this history or context, the prompt supplied specifics regarding the audience (“Mount Holyoke College, a women’s college in Massachusetts”) and date (1997) and noted the speaker’s leadership position at the time (“then United States Secretary of State Madeleine Albright”). This year’s task differed from previous iterations in that it was significantly lengthier; however, its language was very accessible to students.

Within their responses to this rhetorical analysis question, students were expected to explain the choices Albright made in her particular situation for her particular audience and how these choices work. To understand these choices and how they work, a student must first consider the rhetor’s relationship to the audience, as well as how this relationship necessitates both what this specific rhetor should include in—and exclude from—the speech to this specific audience. Additionally, a student must consider how the rhetor arranges the speech for the particular audience in the specific circumstances of the speech. While elements of style certainly merit consideration, they are not the first ingredient on which rhetors focus when developing strategies to persuade audiences: Style is the third canon of rhetoric, not the first or even the second.

In other words, to do well, students needed to understand the purpose of Albright’s speech, what the relationship must have been between Albright and her audience, what the audience’s attitude toward Albright’s message might have been, and how Albright’s specific rhetorical choices worked to make the audience more responsive to her purpose.

How well did the response address the course content related to this question? How well did the responses integrate the skills required on this question?

Students had more success responding to Question 2 than in previous years: The adjusted mean score is notably higher than in previous years. This is the fourth consecutive year in which students have improved the mean on this question.

This year’s higher mean score is largely due to a more accessible prompt that gave students a greater opportunity to succeed. Although the prompt did not inform students that the text was a motivational speech, students could quickly recognize the inspirational nature of Albright’s address. Specifically, the length and more accessible language of this year’s prompt impacted student responses in at least two significant ways:

- the prompt’s length and accessibility enabled students to write longer responses on average than they have in previous years; and
- the variety of rhetorical choices in Albright’s speech allowed students a wider range of materials to analyze—and thus more ways to write a successful analysis.

Albright’s speech offered a wide range of rhetorical approaches that most students readily identified. Almost every student understood the rhetorical situation of Albright’s speech, although higher-scoring essays more fully grasped its complexity. Students generally understood Albright’s desire to motivate her audience and her use of

anecdotes to illustrate not only how much the United States has accomplished in the recent past, but also the crucial roles that women must play in its present and future.

This year, more students than in previous years analyzed the passage without referring to traditional rhetorical terms. As a result, more students focused their energies on explaining what the speaker did and how this choice influenced the success of the rhetoric. Students tended to write more well-developed essays, instead of using explicit rhetorical terms only.

Overall, student performance on this question has improved compared to student performance in past years. Many of the responses effectively discussed Albright’s choices in terms of parallel structure, repetition, and specific kinds of diction. Essays scoring 7 or higher (out of a possible 9 points) convincingly linked Madeleine Albright’s choices to her intended effect on her audience. Some of the best essays did so fully and explicitly, demonstrating how and why Albright “wants her audience to understand” or “forces her audience to acknowledge” key ideas in her speech, chief among them “that perseverance is the key to continued struggle.” Other high-scoring essays focused on repetition, specifically *anaphora*, as an effective choice to deliver the speech’s intended message to its audience. One such essay emphasized “frequent repetition [to] emphasize the need to continue fighting for what you believe in,” a message the student found “especially applicable to Albright’s audience of female college graduates.” Higher-scoring essays also addressed Albright’s appeal to quintessential American values (such as national pride and the spreading of peace and democracy around the world) instead of relying on the language of ethos, logos, et al. Addressing specific values instead of generic rhetorical terms demonstrated a clearer and more convincing understanding of the rhetorical situation.

Less successful essays often did focus on standard rhetorical terms, but the approach did not make them more successful. Lower-scoring essays, whether organized around Albright’s specific appeals or the standard tropes, were more descriptive than analytical. Such essays often did identify Albright’s choices, but did not link those choices to their intended effect on her audience. Mid-to-lower-scoring essays almost all followed what has come to be called the “drive-by” trend; a well-worn structure in which a sentence introduces a trope (e.g., anaphora or pathos), which leads directly to an example and a cursory (often one-sentence) explanation of its role in the speech.

Responses were generally longer than in past years. Even essays scoring a 1 or 2 (out of a possible 9 points) had something to say and did attempt some analysis, although they fell far short. Such responses are partly due to a lengthy, accessible prompt that gave students more material to work with than in past years.

What common student misconceptions or gaps in knowledge were seen in the responses to this question?

<i>Common Misconceptions/Knowledge Gaps</i>	<i>Responses that Demonstrate Understanding</i>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Students focused on summarizing the speech rather than analyzing it. 	<p>“[Albright] states the past, ‘the Berlin Wall is now a memory’, then a hypothetical, ‘We could be satisfied with that’, and then America’s continued work, ‘creating a future’ and building world peace. This powerful form of presenting what has been accomplished then a hypothetical paired with reality is a powerful way to allude to the idea that accomplishing is not enough, we must never stop trying to get better. Without the hypothetical, her statements engender awe and pride in her audience for the progress of America on the world state. But that is not what Albright wants. Albright wants her audience to understand that this continued effort is</p>

	<p>optional, we could be enjoying our technological advancements while ignoring the world. By adding the hypothetical she forces her audience to acknowledge this America is going above and beyond, some hard to do but accomplishable.”</p> <p>This passage analyzes as it describes. This student quotes Albright, illustrating Albright’s use of the subjunctive (the hypothetical) and indicative (the reality) moods. The student then explains how the text would have worked without the subjunctive voice. The author then states that without the subjunctive, Albright’s text would not have achieved her purpose—and the student reiterates Albright’s purpose.</p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Students identified rhetorical terms or choices without explaining how the choice worked in Albright’s rhetorical situation. 	<p>“Albright’s frequent repetition and powerful tone emphasize many of her points even further. From lines 69 to 93, Albright ends each paragraph with the words ‘have courage still and persevere.’ She repeats these words to emphasize the need to continue fighting for what you believe in even in the face of doubt and criticism. This is especially applicable to Albright’s audience of female college graduates. Because of their youth, and sometimes because of their gender, they will all face fierce opposition at some point and they may face people who don’t take them seriously. Albright reiterates the need to push through in the face of these challenges.”</p> <p>Instead of stating “Albright uses epistrophe,” the student paraphrases what Albright does and then moves to explain why this choice is particularly helpful in Albright’s rhetorical situation.</p>

Based on your experience at the AP[®] Reading with student responses, what advice would you offer to teachers to help them improve the student performance on the exam?

1. First, I want to applaud teachers who have “heard the call” to start focusing more on the speaker/writer’s rhetorical situation and less on rhetorical terms. The increase in score appears to have resulted from this change. Teachers should continue what they appear to be doing in the classroom, extending students’ abilities to analyze rhetorically to other situations students encounter, explicitly to their reading of passages such as the sources in the synthesis question of this exam.
2. Many students appear to have “pre-packaged” responses to this question, and these pre-packaged responses often hinder students’ abilities to do well. Such pre-packaged responses take various forms. One is that students appear to have been taught formulas for responding (e.g., “In [date], [speaker/writer] addressed [audience] in order to [purpose] using [three rhetorical choices].” The student then uses a five-paragraph essay structure to describe these three choices). Another is that students aim for a choice that may have worked on past exams they have considered in class (e.g., use of first or second person), but does not work particularly well for the passage the students are analyzing on the exam.
3. Teachers can emphasize that the rhetorical analysis question does not have “correct” answers. Often, both successful and unsuccessful responses identify the same rhetorical features within a passage; however, what makes some responses successful and others unsuccessful is not the “identification” of the features, but the students’ abilities to explain how those features work within the writer/speaker’s rhetorical situation. Too often, students list what a speaker does, appearing to think that the more successful choices they identify, the better they’ll do on the exam; instead, success comes from the ability to dig deep into the explanations of *why* and *how* the choices work in the particular contexts.

Question #3**Task:** Argument**Topic:** Value of exploring the unknown**Max. Points:** 9**Mean Score:** 4.46***What were the responses to this question expected to demonstrate?***

The argument prompt asked that students read a quote from Anne Morrow Lindbergh’s *Gift from the Sea* and write an essay in which they develop a position on the value of exploring the unknown. Therefore, the students were expected to demonstrate some understanding of what the unknown might be.

Students were then expected to take a position on Lindbergh’s statement and to support that claim with discussion of ways in which the unknown has or does not have value.

How well did the response address the course content related to this question? How well did the responses integrate the skills required on this question?

The prompt was accessible for the vast majority of students, with many responding with understanding and ease. Christopher Columbus, Lewis and Clark, and the space race were frequently summoned as examples to illustrate how the unknown can be rewarding; fewer students argued that the unknown is not rewarding, though many excellent essays did do so.

In upper-half essays, students responded to Lindbergh’s quote by calling on the likes of JFK, Galileo, and a laundry list of other scientists, explorers, and astronauts, as well as musicians, and philosophers. However, students also wrote about experiences traveling abroad, sailing for 17 days with a team of their peers, participating in a Mock UN, meeting the love of their lives, and rope climbing for the first time—all of which demonstrated for them what happened when the unknown is explored. They were able to create seamless transitions even when they were drawing on a variety of evidence to support their positions.

Essays that scored in the lower half of the scoring guide were less successful in acknowledging and offering adequate support for how Lindbergh’s words were made manifest through a variety of examples—some historic, some literary, some cultural, and some personal. Students’ successes were not predicated exclusively on the kinds of evidence employed, as students scored in both the upper and lower halves by using literary, historic, cultural, and personal experiences. Success with this prompt rested with students’ abilities to employ evidence and then articulate how that evidence functions in support of the value in exploring the unknown.

What common student misconceptions or gaps in knowledge were seen in the responses to this question?

<i>Common Misconceptions/Knowledge Gaps</i>	<i>Responses that Demonstrate Understanding</i>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Students defined the unknown without stating a position on Lindbergh’s claim. 	<p>“Exploration and experimentation have been two important factors for the development of human society. Without either, many facets of our modern day society and culture would simply not exist. A main driver behind both exploration and experimentation is the thrill of excitement of discovering or doing something new. In life, doing something unknown to us is often where most of our experiences and memories will be made. ‘Choosing’ this unknown is vital for the development of society, and the development of ourselves.”</p>

	<p>Here the student both defines the “unknown” (exploration and experimentation) and takes the position that such a choice of the unknown is “vital.”</p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Student repeat their claim via paraphrases of the claim instead of supporting the claim. 	<p>“The principles of science are synonymous with exploration of the unknown. President John F. Kennedy is famously quoted as saying that the US would land on the moon ‘not because it is easy, but because it is hard.’ In the face of public uncertainty, Kennedy set out to explore one of the biggest unknowns of modern humanity: outer space. Obviously, the moon landing was successful, and the subsequent technological development benefited all aspects of society. Billions were allocated in research funding and as a result, humanity expanded its sphere of knowledge greatly. Yet, this is not a recent phenomenon. One of the most famous scientists in history, Galileo Galilei, chose to explore and challenge commonly held truth. He was ridiculed for claiming that the Earth revolved around the Sun, yet it was his desire to enter into the unfamiliar that led to the scientific advances by the US under Kennedy so many years later.”</p> <p>Instead of simply asserting (as many students do) that “science shows the value of exploring the unknown,” this student explains the unknown and why the exploration of it was valuable.</p>

Based on your experience at the AP® Reading with student responses, what advice would you offer to teachers to help them improve the student performance on the exam?

1. When working with students, teachers need to help students understand that the first step in the process of writing an on-demand essay is to dissect, and therefore comprehend, the prompt. Students who understood that their charge was to take a position on the “value of exploring the unknown” did do fairly well, using a variety of evidence to support their position.
2. Once students clearly understand what the prompt is asking of them, teachers might consider helping them to then understand that when they chose a variety of kinds/types of evidence as support for their position, they should focus on finding ways to articulate how the different pieces fit together. Students should learn that this will help their audience understand how the variety of evidence connects back to what the prompt is asking. Essays that accomplished this feat were less disjointed; more full and complete.
3. Teachers need to emphasize that paraphrasing the claim in various ways is not a means of supporting the claim.

4. Students need to learn to explain how the evidence they choose illustrates why their claim is valid. What many lower-level essays do is list examples and then assert that the example supports the claim. Students should explain *how* the example illustrates the truth of the claim.