



Student Performance Q&A: 2013 AP[®] European History Free-Response Questions

The following comments on the 2013 free-response questions for AP[®] European History were written by the Chief Reader, Jeffrey Hamilton of Baylor University, Waco, Texas. 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.

Question 1

What was the intent of this question?

The intent of this question was to assess students' abilities to analyze primary source documents regarding both religious arguments concerning the desirability or undesirability of religious toleration and everyday practices regarding religious toleration, to arrange the sources into analytically useful groups, and to provide examples of point of view implicit in the documents.

How well did students perform on this question?

The mean score of this question was 3.80 out of a possible 9 points.

Many students did not explicitly address either arguments or practices in their thesis statements; in many cases, students conflated both tasks. For the most part, students had little problem interpreting a majority of documents correctly. Many students developed at least three clear groupings, most often "pro-toleration," "anti-toleration," and "compromise with conditions." Students often incorporated relevant outside information, reflecting the great emphasis placed on this subject.

What were common student errors or omissions?

Many students did not address both aspects of the prompt: "arguments" and "practices."

Students were sometimes misled by documents 1 and 3. Some students were unable to find a valid third group once they established "pro-toleration" and "anti-toleration" as two opposing positions expressed in the documents. Effectively established point-of-view analysis remains difficult for many students.

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?

Because students often neglected to use arguments and practices in their thesis statements, they should be better trained to deal explicitly with two-task DBQ prompts.

Emphasis should be placed on training students to analyze individual documents and to recognize point-of-view in a variety of documents.

Students should be trained to recognize and demonstrate multiple groupings of documents.

Question 2

What was the intent of this question?

The intent of the question was to assess the students' ability to perform the following tasks:

- Demonstrate an understanding of Renaissance art.
- Demonstrate an understanding of Renaissance politics.
- Demonstrate an understanding of how art reflected political ideals during this period.
- Demonstrate an understanding of Neoclassical and/or Romantic art.
- Demonstrate an understanding of late 18th century and early 19th century political trends.
- Demonstrate an understanding of how art reflected political ideals during this period.
- Demonstrate an understanding of how the two periods differed in how art and politics connected.

How well did students perform on this question?

The mean score of this question was 2.30 out of a possible 9 points. Many students were able to accomplish all of the tasks set by the question, using accurate analyses of artistic and political trends, supported with specific evidence, particularly for the later period. However, many students struggled to write balanced essays. Instead, many essays emphasized one artistic/political period over the other, emphasized artistic analysis over political analysis, or emphasized political analysis over artistic analysis.

What were common student errors or omissions?

Many students did not recognize that artistic ideas had to be clearly and substantively connected to political ideals, beliefs, and developments. Instead many students wrote generic art history paragraphs which simply explored the characteristics of Renaissance art and Neo-Classical/Romantic art. Another common omission was the lack of adequate specific evidence to support the claims made in the essay. Many essays discussed Renaissance humanism and individualism, which may have political implications, without clearly articulating the actual political dimension of these ideas.

Based on your experience of student responses at the AP® Reading, what message would you like to send to teachers that might help them to improve the performance of their students on the exam?

Students need to read the question carefully (more than once, if necessary) so they understand exactly what is required. Students must understand that claims without specific evidence have very little persuasive power. Students need to be encouraged to think across different thematic categories, e.g., how economic factors influence political ones, how political factors influence artistic ones, etc.

Students need to be taught how to write an effective thesis. An effective thesis must be directed at the question, and should signal clearly where the argument of the essay will go.

Students need to use terms like “political” very carefully and accurately. In response to this prompt, students often asserted or assumed that an idea was political without any foundation.

Question 3

What was the intent of this question?

The question was designed to measure students’ ability to contrast the differences in motives for two periods. It also assessed their historical knowledge of European colonial expansion in those two periods.

How well did students perform on this question?

The mean score of this question was 3.64 out of a possible 9 points. Students came to this question with a fair amount of knowledge; many students cited famous explorers and knew something about mercantilism for the earlier period, and imperialism and “The White Man’s Burden” for the later period. The essay lent itself to a straightforward organization (one section on early colonization and one on later colonization). This enabled many students to balance their treatments of the two periods. The best essays provided multiple motives and specific examples for each period, and provided good analysis with contextualization.

What were common student errors or omissions?

The most common omission was the failure to provide specific examples. Students in the low- to middle-range usually provided generalizations (e.g., Europeans in the New World) without naming a specific actor, country, or idea. For essays that were less structured, these generalizations made it difficult for a reader to follow the analysis of the differences between the two periods. Other students wrote about the effects of colonization and did not pay much attention to the motives, or spent a lot of time discussing explorers without making the connection to actual colonies and the motives for creating them.

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?

This question tapped into a broad base of student knowledge, so there was a lot of room for students to work comfortably. What would help the vast majority of them would be to remember to use specific examples to support their assertions, and to explain a little more about the ideas they offer and the connections of those ideas to the task at hand. For example, mentioning Social Darwinism is more effective when it’s explained a little, perhaps attached to a specific actor (e.g., Great Britain) and linked to a motive for colonization; it is even more effective when it is contrasted to prevailing notions about race and culture in the earlier period. The difference between a good essay and a superior essay is in the use of specific evidence to support the thesis

Question 4

What was the intent of this question?

The question was intended to assess students’ ability to synthesize and explain the differing impacts of Newtonian physics and Darwinian biology on European culture. The prompt purposefully repeated the impact statement to remind students that this essay should focus on culture, rather than science. The absence of a specific time frame allowed for students to develop full arguments.

How well did students perform on this question?

The mean score of this question was 3.16 out of a possible 9 points. Students responded to this question with varying degrees of success. Whereas very few students interpreted culture in the strict sense of arts

and literature, many discussed Darwin and particularly Newton in the context of science. Most students did know something about the prompt. Most students were able to discuss some aspect of Darwin's impact on society, in particular, the development of Social Darwinism, and most were also able to describe at least briefly the impact of both scientists' findings on established religious beliefs and institutions. Some stronger essays discussed the philosophes' quest to apply the concept of Newton's natural laws to society. Some essays also more astutely discussed the relationship between Darwin's ideas and Social Darwinism.

The phrasing of the question caused most students to write a paragraph on Newton's impact on culture and a paragraph on Darwin's impact on culture, followed sometimes with a third paragraph about differences. Most students reserved their explicit judgment concerning differences for the concluding paragraph, after elaborating on the impacts in the body of the essay. As a result, many students struggled to formulate a clear and explicit thesis. Whereas most would allude to or singularly state an impact of each scientist, few emphasized causal linkages between particular cultural effects and particular Newtonian or Darwinian concepts.

What were common student errors or omissions?

Many students struggled to articulate clear cultural or societal impacts, particularly with respect to Newton but, in some cases, also with respect to Darwin. Many essays limited themselves to a discussion of Newton's and Darwin's scientific ideas, rather than their impact on society, thus ignoring a central charge of the prompt. As the question did not have a defined time frame, the main chronological errors involved anachronistic discussions of figures predating Newton or Darwin (e.g., claiming that Newton influenced Galileo). Students tended to confuse Malthus' influence on Darwin, and often did not discuss Spencer's contributions to Social Darwinism. Finally, many essays skipped over the concept of racism/racial superiority in their linkage between Social Darwinism and Hitler's and the Nazis' views of the Jews.

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 and foremost, teachers should emphasize to students that when dealing with a prompt that asks for "impacts" (or "effects" or "factors"), an explicit thesis that discusses causal linkages is of vital importance. Many essays were given low scores due to underdeveloped theses or theses that merely repeated the prompt. Furthermore, students should be taught to give evidentiary examples for every assertion in their essay to prevent an unbalanced discussion.

Question 5

What was the intent of the question?

The question assessed the students' ability to analyze the cause-and-effect relationship between the major political, social, and economic developments of the 20th century (roughly the last 25 percent of the course) on the experience of the largest social subgroup: women.

How well did students perform on this question?

The mean score of this question was 3.52 out of a possible 9 points. Students' responses provided a balance of responses that demonstrated varying levels of historical thinking and essay writing skills. Well-prepared students were able to demonstrate mastery, while less-prepared students were still afforded a fair opportunity to construct some type of response.

What were common student errors or omissions?

One common error was to analyze reasons for the contraction of the female workforce. Another common error was to discuss the expansion of women's rights without reference to its effect on the women's participation in the paid workforce. In addition, many students made extensive references to evidence from the 19th century, outside the chronological scope of the 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?

Content: It is critical for students to have an opportunity to study the entire 20th century as well as to examine links between political, social, and economic history. In addition, women's history should be fully integrated into the course and ways in which it diverges from men's history should be analyzed.

Skills: The skills that most benefitted students in this question were familiarity with the process of structuring cause and effect argumentation, as well as the standard essay skills of precise attention to task, thesis development, and supporting assertions with adequate evidence.

Chronology and periodization: As mentioned above, even the broad time period did not prevent some students from discussing the first Industrial Revolution, the French Revolution, and Elizabeth I. Students responded to one task, women in the workforce, and often ignored the chronological basis of the question. Students should receive a better grounding in the broad chronological outlines of major developments in the course.

Question 6

What was the intent of this question?

The question was intended to assess the students' ability to deal with a number of important themes in AP® European History — the rise and functioning of the modern state in its various forms, developments in political thought (isms), private/state roles in economic activity, and the changing distribution of wealth and poverty.

How well did students perform on this question?

The mean score of this question was 2.90 out of a possible 9 points. A significant number of students were unprepared to deal with the subject matter of the prompt. Many essays presented the readers with one of three standard narratives: (1) a Cold War essay, (2) a European recovery and integration essay, or (3) a conflation of the Cold war and European integration essay. Such essays often asserted that the Truman Doctrine or the EEC promoted the expansion of the welfare state without establishing an effective link. Students also defined the "welfare state" with varying degrees of accuracy and precision. The weakest responses engaged in a historical tour of Europe that sometimes started with the decline of feudalism and then took the reader through the Industrial Revolution of the 19th century.

What were common student errors or omissions?

Many students displayed a very nebulous understanding of the concept of the "welfare state." Such students were likely to refer to the welfare state as an institution designed to relieve suffering in a "totally devastated Europe." Such sweeping generalizations characterized a significant number of essays. Other students struggled with the subject and produced essays on Europe during the Cold War or on European recovery and integration (with considerable repetition.) A number of students also used the question as an opportunity to launch polemical assaults on the concept of the welfare state. Less common, but still distinctive, was the confusion demonstrated by students who believed that the welfare state is a form of

the “warfare state.” Finally, many students correctly mentioned Margaret Thatcher as an enemy of the welfare state, but failed to connect such information to the topic under consideration.

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 must ensure that their students are prepared to respond to post-1945 questions that go beyond the two most popular topics: the Cold War or European recovery and integration. One possible strategy would be to open the academic year with the contemporary period (1945 to the present.) Such an approach requires considerable preparation and thought, because the instructor will need to decide what topics or issues must now receive less thorough treatment. A second possibility would be to use published exam questions for the period as the basis for brief student presentations on some of the topics that teachers usually neglect or skip, such as decolonization or the welfare state.

Question 7

What was the intent of this question?

The question was intended to assess students’ ability to analyze the problems in the interwar period, the failure of post-1918 governments to address those problems, and how this failure contributed to the rise of right-wing dictatorships in continental Europe.

How well did students perform on this question?

The mean score of this question was 3.62 out of a possible 9 points. The vast majority of students knew something about the interwar period and Hitler, and many also knew something about Mussolini, so most students had something relevant to say even if they could not clearly link the two ends of the question together. Many students were able to provide at least a rudimentary analysis, linking difficulties of postwar life and disappointment with Versailles and/or weak governments to the rise of the right-wing dictators. Overall, students performed adequately on this question, with some performing very well.

What were common student errors or omissions?

Including the Soviet Union as a right-wing government was the most common serious error. Very few students discussed countries other than Germany and Italy, although they did not need to go beyond those two in order to earn a high score on this question. Spain was a distant third, and students generally could not connect the rise of Franco to postwar conditions nearly as well as they could connect Hitler and Mussolini. Very few students discussed Eastern European countries. The most common problem for the weaker exams was the absence of clear connections between the rise of right-wing regimes and the problems of the interwar period; many of these students could identify some of the problems and discuss Hitler and Mussolini, but could not show clear connections between the two.

Based on your experience of student responses at the AP® Reading, what message would you like to send to teachers that might help them to improve the performance of their students on the exam?

The problems fell into two categories: First, some students simply did not understand the difference between a right-wing regime and a communist regime. Because many textbooks discuss the Soviet Union in the same section as the other authoritarian regimes, students may tend to think of them as one group, so the differences between them need to be highlighted. Second, many students could not analyze and link the first part of the question to the second part of the question. Some students did a good job explaining the problems of interwar Europe, but had trouble showing how Hitler and Mussolini leveraged

those problems to gain support. Teachers should emphasize the importance of constructing explicit causal analyses rather than writing simple narratives.