



Student Performance Q&A:

2014 AP® French Language and Culture Free-Response Questions

The following comments on the 2014 free-response questions for AP® French Language and Culture were written by the Chief Reader, Pascal Ifri of Washington University in St. Louis. 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 the student 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 must address all the questions and requests raised in the message, as well as ask for more details about something mentioned in the message.

The course theme for the e-mail reply was “*la vie contemporaine*.” The task required students to use the formal register to respond to two questions from a person in charge of recruiting interns interested in working for a European company. It was implied that the student has previously shown interest in such an opportunity. The two questions asked were the following: “In what field would you consider working and why?” and “What has been your language experience so far?” The student was also required to ask for more details about a point mentioned in the e-mail.

How well did students perform on this question?

The Standard Group’s¹ mean score for Question 1, the E-mail reply (Interpersonal Writing), was 2.96 out of a possible 5.00 points.

What were common student errors or omissions?

- Most errors were either lack of understanding of the vocabulary used in the e-mail or the use of language in a specific context.

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

- Many students misunderstood crucial words or phrases such as “*stage*,” “*parcours linguistique*,” “*interface incontournable*,” “*domaine*,” and even “*commercial*,” which resulted in an illogical or partly illogical response.
- Many students also did not follow the directions and omitted the request for further details about some point mentioned in the message.
- Other students used anglicisms or even English words such as “*excité*,” “*fluent*,” or “*proficient*” or else confused words such as “*Espagne*” and “*espagnol*,” “*Allemagne*” and “*allemand*” or “*étrange*” and “*étranger*.”
- Generally, this lack of understanding the vocabulary hindered many students from being able to fully express what they wanted to say.

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 would be helpful for teachers to remind students that they must follow the directions: 1.) respond to the specific questions/requests expressed in the e-mail, and 2.) ask for more details about something mentioned in the message. Often students do not fully complete all the elements of the task.
- Teachers are encouraged to offer opportunities for their students to practice this task-type and respond to e-mails covering a wide range of topics from the course themes. It would also be helpful for students to have a “mock” testing environment in which they are asked to complete this task in the time allotted per the exam (15 minutes).
- Teachers should not encourage students to use ready-made sentences with idioms. Most of the time, those sentences do not address the topic.
- Teachers should ask students not to merely recycle language from the stimulus, but to answer the questions directly and to try to bring in words and expressions beyond those included in the stimulus.
- It is more important that teachers make sure that students understand how to maintain the formal register throughout their response and to use the proper/appropriate vocabulary directly related to the topic. Teachers should not spend too much time on the proper forms of openings and closings.
- It is also recommended that teachers work with students on answering the questions posed in the e-mail with sentences rather than lists. In this particular instance, many responses contained list of fields in which the students were interested and a list of languages they had studied. Students should offer more in-depth information in their response.
- Teachers should make sure that students know the basic grammar and vocabulary for such a task, such as the difference between “*depuis*,” “*pendant*,” and “*il y a*.”

Task 2: Persuasive Essay

What was the intent of this question?

This task assessed writing in the presentational communicative mode by having the student 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 of the sources to support the essay. As they referred to the sources, they had to identify them appropriately. Furthermore, the essay had to be organized into clear paragraphs.

The course theme for the persuasive essay task was “*la famille et la communauté*.” Students had to write a persuasive essay on the following topic: “Should the voting age be lowered to 16?” The first source was a 2012 online article, entitled “No to the Voting Right at 16: Impossible to Exercise Political Judgment at Such a Young Age.” The article argues against lowering the voting age to 16 mainly because young men and women below the age of 18 still go to school and are not part of the national political community. The second source was a graph showing the percentage of the French population that voted in the 2007 presidential election according to sex and age. The third source was a radio interview of a high school student leader who supports the right to vote at 16.

How well did students perform on this question?

The Standard Group’s mean score for Question 2, the Persuasive Essay (Presentational Writing), was 3.03 out of a possible 5.00 points.

What were common student errors or omissions?

- Most students seemed to be well versed in the organization and structure of a persuasive essay, but often at the expense of the language and grammar. Many students did not have the proper vocabulary to answer the question in a satisfactory manner and thus used neologisms or anglicisms, such as “*ability*,” “*issue*,” or “*involver*.” In addition, basic grammatical errors marred many responses, such as agreement mistakes, the difference between “*avoir*” and “*être*,” the use of the subjunctive, the wrong verb conjugations, etc.
- Another common problem was the failure to integrate information from all three sources to support the essay or to refer to them explicitly.
- Some students did not read the graph correctly while others were confused by the information provided by the speakers in the third source (the audio interview).

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 would be a great help for the students if teachers would incorporate the use of authentic audio material in the lessons and assess students on their understanding of the material. It is nice to play authentic material for students but without the assessment part, students do not always give their utmost attention to the content.
- Teachers should make sure that students know the necessary grammar, especially the correct use of verb tenses (i.e., the subjunctive with the following conjunctions: “*bien que*,” “*à condition que*,” “*pour que*”) and verbal construction (i.e., “*si*” clauses).
- Students would also benefit from knowing how to organize their essays and use transitional words and phrases.
- In order to enrich students’ vocabulary resources, teachers should ensure that vocabulary is taught in context rather than as a list of stock phrases. Teachers should make sure students are aware of common anglicisms and “*faux amis*.”
- Teachers should make sure that students are fully aware of the requirements of this task type and its required elements. Classroom practice with planning and writing persuasive essays, with particular emphasis on integrating information from all three sources as well as citing the appropriate source is highly recommended. Students should be given the opportunity to practice developing their own points of view in writing based on articles or audio selections in the target language. It is strongly advised that teachers reinforce the fact that this task requires a clear statement of the student’s own opinion rather than a mere restatement of stereotypes or of opinions expressed in the source materials.
- Teachers should encourage students to write as legibly as possible.

- Teachers should make sure students are aware of appropriate use of register and remind them to use the formal register throughout (students should never use popular or colloquial vocabulary or expressions).
- Teachers are encouraged to collaborate with colleagues teaching other AP[®] subjects which involve writing.

Task 3: Conversation

What was the intent of this question?

This task assessed speaking in the interpersonal communicative mode by having the student 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. Then the conversation proceeded, including 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 as well as the simulated interlocutor's utterance.

The course theme for the conversation task was "*la famille et la communauté*." In this task, the student receives a phone call from Martine, the daughter of the family with whom the student will stay for one year while studying in France. With the departure date getting close, Martine calls to check a few points about the student's stay. The student needed to respond to the following five audio prompts:

1. Martine says that she is calling to check a few things and asks the student if he/she is getting ready for his/her year in France. The student had to respond to the question and show his/her enthusiasm.
2. Martine mentions that the student will be able to meet her entire family on the Sunday following his/her arrival because her family gets together on Sundays. She asks the student if his/her family does the same. The student had to respond with a few details.
3. Martine adds that her friends are eager to meet the student, briefly explains the type of activities she does with them, and asks the student what he/she likes to do with his/her own friends. The student had to respond by providing specific examples of activities that he/she does with his/her friends.
4. Martine then explains that there are a lot of short vacations in France and that she often takes trips with her family. She then asks the student where he/she would like to go or what he/she would like to do with Martine's family. The student had to make a few suggestions.
5. Martine adds that the trunk of her family's car is rather small and that the student should keep that in mind when packing. She also says that she looks forward to seeing the student and asks him/her to contact her if he/she has any questions. The student had to react to the comments and end the conversation in an appropriate manner.

How well did students perform on this question?

The Standard Group's mean score for Question 3, the Conversation (Interpersonal Speaking), was 2.93 out of a possible 5.00 points.

What were common student errors or omissions?

- The first part of the first prompt was not always well understood. Many students did not understand the verb "*accueillir*" and thus had a slight misunderstanding of the basic situation, which created some confusion throughout the remainder of the conversation.
- Few students knew how to express enthusiasm or emotions in general. Consequently, many just said "*Je suis très excité(e)*."
- Students had problems reacting to the final comment, besides saying "*d'accord*" and "*au revoir*."

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 would be very beneficial for the students if teachers would carefully explain the process for this task type and remind students to read the instructions. Also, teachers need to encourage students to listen to the prompts and concentrate on what is being said and respond following the outline provided.
- Teachers need to explain to the students that the outline provided needs to be used as an aid for the students to prepare themselves for what they will be hearing at each turn of the conversation.
- Classroom practice with this task type would be very beneficial for the students. Teachers should offer opportunities for students so that the students may continue to work on their speaking skills as well as get used to the 20 second response time. It is important for students to elaborate as much as possible rather than just give simple and brief responses.
- Teachers should have students practice responding in sentences with correct verb usage and conjugations. Practice with the more difficult verbs is highly recommended as well as verbs followed by prepositions. Teachers should also include conversational exercises in class so that students can acquire and assimilate colloquial vocabulary and expressions. Students would benefit greatly from practice with geographical prepositions (i.e., “*en France*,” “*aux USA*”).
- Teachers need to work with students on pronunciation skills. Many errors are made due to mispronunciation of vocabulary and inaccurate pronunciation of verb endings (i.e., “*temPZ*” or “*allonZ*”). Good pronunciation is key for success in this task.

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

The course theme for the cultural comparison was “*la science et la technologie*.” Students had to respond to the following question: “How have recent scientific innovations affected people’s lives in your community?” Students had to compare their observations of their own community to their observations of a Francophone country or region. Students could make reference to what they had studied, observed, or experienced in order to support their response.

How well did students perform on this question?

The Standard Group’s mean score for Question 4, the Cultural Comparison (Presentational Speaking), was 2.98 out of a possible 5.00 points.

What were common student errors or omissions?

- One of the most common errors is that the student did not identify his/her own culture as a point of reference.
- Many students did not explicitly make a comparison but rather presented a series of facts that are characteristic of each culture mentioned.
- Many students gave an unbalanced response, spending too much time on one of the two cultures.

- Instead of elaborating or developing specific examples of scientific innovations, many students just gave a list of technological devices that can be found in each culture. The discussion of iPhones/Apple products were mentioned by many students.
- A large number of students presented cultural stereotypes rather than specific examples about the particular culture. Stereotypes may also lead to inaccurate information (i.e., there is no internet in Africa or Haitians are poor and do not have cell phones). Speaking about stereotypes of a specific culture does not equate to knowledge about a particular culture.
- Some students, especially those currently in a Francophone environment, did not understand that they had to compare their community to a different area of the “French-speaking world.”

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 present various Francophone cultures in as much depth as possible, using authentic material, to ensure that students have a clear understanding of the culture that goes beyond stereotypical knowledge.
- It would be a great help to the students if teachers would carefully explain this task type to the students and emphasize the need for a comparison of the two cultures. Also, teachers need to remind students to carefully read the required topic of the presentation.
- Since the students have four minutes to prepare their response, they should be encouraged to organize their thoughts, to take notes, to create some sort of presentation tool (graphic organizer) that they may use as they record their presentation.
- Teachers should give students various strategies for making an effective comparison; methods for introducing transitional phrases and structures needed to compare and contrast; and, means for providing vocabulary to present one’s opinion. In particular, students should practice making an effective presentation rather than offering a list of ideas/characteristics.
- Students would benefit from practice of this task type to ensure that they are treating the topic in a balanced manner.
- Teachers should emphasize that an effective comparison requires the students to equally discuss both their own community and a Francophone community, and that they must explicitly articulate the similarities and differences between them.