



## Student Performance Q&A:

### 2014 AP® German Language and Culture Free-Response Questions

The following comments on the 2014 free-response questions for AP® German Language and Culture were written by the Chief Reader, Jennifer Redmann of Franklin & Marshall College in Lancaster, Pa. 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: E-mail Reply

##### *What was the intent of this question?*

This task assessed writing in the interpersonal communicative mode by having students write a reply to an e-mail message. Students were allotted 15 minutes to read the message and write the reply. The response received a single holistic score based on how well it accomplished the assigned task. Students needed to be able first to comprehend the e-mail and then to write a reply using a formal form of address. The reply had to address all the questions and requests raised in the message, as well as ask for more details about something mentioned in the message.

The course theme for the e-mail reply was *Alltag*. The task required students to reply to an e-mail from Lilly Horn, who will be hosting the student in her home when the student's school choir visits Vienna in the summer. Students were to communicate what kind of accommodations they expect while staying with the Horn family in Vienna ("*Könnten Sie uns mitteilen, was für eine Wohnsituation Sie hier bei uns erwarten?*") and what kinds of things they like to do when they are tourists in a city ("*Wofür interessieren Sie sich, wenn Sie als Tourist unterwegs sind?*"). Students were to ask for more details about something in the message; possible topics included questions about Lilly Horn's family, her apartment, or the city of Vienna. Students had to open their message with a formal greeting and end with a formal closing.

##### *How well did students perform on this question?*

Students performed well on Question 1, the E-mail Reply, which had a mean of 3.14 out of a possible score of 5. Most students were readily able to read and write an effective response to the e-mail, although some students misunderstood the situation presented in the e-mail and wrote responses that were not entirely appropriate within the context of the exchange.

### ***What were common student errors or omissions?***

The e-mail's focus on housing and tourist activities gave most students ample opportunity for elaboration in their replies. However, some students misunderstood the context and intent of the e-mail. Rather than respond to Lilly Horn's inquiries about the student's expectations during his/her upcoming stay with the Horn family in Vienna, some students wrote e-mails offering Lilly a place to stay during *her* trip to the United States. This misunderstanding may have stemmed from an inability to identify the subjects and objects of personal and possessive pronouns mentioned in the e-mail, including the formal you (*Sie, Ihnen*). Most students did understand that they were to use a formal register in the e-mail, but some incorrectly combined a formal salutation with the recipient's first name. A misunderstanding of the function of the word *Chormitglied* (which Lilly Horn uses to address the student as a member of the touring choir) led many students to sign off with that word rather than their own name.

### ***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 E-mail Reply is primarily an interpersonal writing task, but it also requires skill in interpretive reading. Teachers should provide students with frequent opportunities to read and analyze e-mails before replying, drawing students' attention in particular to the functions and referents of personal pronouns. The e-mail from Lilly Horn on this year's exam features several shifts in perspective (from the writer's own situation in Vienna to that of the recipient's life in the U.S.) and students must be able to follow such shifts, given that they are typical of interpersonal communication. Since students have only 15 minutes to read and respond to the e-mail on the exam, it would also be helpful for teachers to set time limits for students to write practice e-mails. Students should write in a formal register and pay close attention to how register is reflected in pronouns and word choice, as well as in salutations and closings.

## **Question 2: Persuasive Essay**

### ***What was the intent of this question?***

This task assessed writing in the presentational communicative mode by having students write a persuasive essay on a given topic while referencing three sources of information about the topic. Students were first allotted 6 minutes to read the essay topic and the two printed sources. Then they listened to the one audio source. Afterward, they had 40 minutes to write the essay. The response received a single holistic score based on how well it accomplished the assigned task. Students needed to be able first to comprehend the three sources and then to present their different viewpoints. They also had to present their own viewpoint and defend it thoroughly, using information from all the sources to support the essay. As they referred to the sources, they needed to identify them appropriately. Furthermore, the essay had to be organized into clear paragraphs.

The course theme for the persuasive essay task was *Alltag*. Students wrote their persuasive essay in response to the question of whether more German students should attend private schools ("*Sollten mehr Schüler in Deutschland auf Privatschulen gehen?*"). The print source (*Quellenmaterial 1*) criticizes the increasing popularity of private schools among middle-class Germans. The main argument against this trend is the high cost of private education and the separation of social classes it engenders. *Quellenmaterial 2*, a table, summarizes the results of a survey of over 1,000 German parents about why they would choose a private school for their children. *Quellenmaterial 3*, the audio to which students listen twice, presents a viewpoint that contrasts with that of the print source. Students and teachers at private schools in Germany describe some of the things that they especially like about their schools, including parents' involvement in the schools and an educational focus on openness with respect to other cultures.

### *How well did students perform on this question?*

Students performed well on Task 2, the Persuasive Essay, which had a mean of 3.34 out of a possible score of 5. The school-oriented topic was clearly accessible to students, and most were readily able to express an opinion on the question of whether it would be advantageous for German students to attend private schools.

### *What were common student errors or omissions?*

While students were generally able to offer an opinion on the topic of private schools, not all students were able to comprehend and use the source material effectively. Some students presented inaccurate information from the sources in their arguments, making incorrect claims about the sources that reflected their own knowledge and assumptions about the topic rather than the actual content. (For example, the audio source states that a private school in Germany raised 20,000 Euro in donations to support its operations, but many students cited that amount as the cost of tuition for the school.) For the most part, students focused in their essays on private schooling in the United States and only referred to the German context indirectly when citing the sources. In structuring their essays, many students did not integrate source material into their own argument. Instead, they summarized the sources and then presented their own opinion without making a connection back to the secondary material.

### *Based on your experience of student responses at the AP<sup>®</sup> 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 should learn to develop a clear outline for their persuasive essays before they begin writing. Although working on an outline during the exam may take time away from writing, a relatively short essay that is well organized and concisely argued will receive a higher score than a longer essay that is repetitive or rambling. Students should be encouraged to state their thesis (i.e., their answer to the question) early and draw on the source material to support that thesis, rather than begin with a summary of the sources.

Students can and should take advantage of words and phrases from the source material in building their arguments, but they should be reminded to use quotation marks if they are citing the sources verbatim. In general, students should use direct quotes sparingly, since paraphrasing source material is a better way to demonstrate their comprehension of the material than direct citations. If students do not know the German translation for a particular English word, they should do their best to circumlocute rather than simply insert an English word. Canned idiomatic phrases or memorized quotes from famous people generally do not contribute to the effectiveness of a student's argument. Finally, teachers should remind students that legible handwriting and correct punctuation, especially commas, contribute enormously to the readability of their essays.

## **Question 3: Conversation**

### *What was the intent of this question?*

This task assessed speaking in the interpersonal communicative mode by having students respond as part of a simulated oral conversation. Students were first allotted 1 minute to read a preview of the conversation, including an outline of each turn in the conversation. 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 to the simulated interlocutor's utterance.

The course theme for the conversation task was *Familie und Gemeinschaft*. In this task, the interlocutor (Sabine) opens the conversation by asking the student to return the iPad that she had lent to him or her. The student is supposed to apologize and tell her why he or she can't return it yet. In the second turn, Sabine explains why she needs the iPad back right away. The student is directed to show sympathy for Sabine's predicament and suggest a solution. In the next turn, Sabine accepts the solution but suggests that the student might want to do something especially nice for her to make up for not returning the iPad on time, and asks what that nice gesture might be. After the student responds, Sabine shifts the topic of conversation by recalling that the student wanted to use the iPad for a presentation, then asking what the student thinks of giving a presentation in front of a class. After the student gives his or her opinion on that question, Sabine closes her part of the conversation by wondering whether the student would like to receive an iPad or perhaps something else as a gift for his or her upcoming birthday. The student is supposed to answer and then say good-bye.

### ***How well did students perform on this question?***

The mean score for Task 3, the Conversation, was 3.38 out of a possible score of 5, the highest of the four free-response tasks. Students seemed to relate very well to the situation of the borrowed iPad. Most were able to participate appropriately in the conversation and to respond to the prompts as directed by the conversation overview. Very few students had to give up on turns or resort to statements such as *ich weiß nicht* or *ich verstehe das nicht*.

### ***What were common student errors or omissions?***

In general, students understood the situation, although some thought that Sabine was giving them an iPad, rather than asking for its return. Failure to adhere to the conversation overview led some students to respond inappropriately to Sabine's questions and statements. One conversation turn in particular proved difficult for many students: when Sabine asked the student's opinion about giving a presentation in front of a class, a number of students thought she was asking how they liked using an iPad for a presentation or how well their presentation in German class had gone.

### ***Based on your experience of student responses at the AP<sup>®</sup> 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 should actively learn the vocabulary items typically used in the conversation overview — both the meanings of the words (such as *vorschlagen* or *sich verabschieden*) and the phrases that one would use to make a suggestion, say goodbye, and so on. In practicing the simulated conversation, teachers should remind students to adhere to the overview and to avoid taking the conversation in a different direction, since that would undercut their ability to maintain the exchange with appropriate responses. Students should be encouraged to elaborate within their responses and say as much as they can during the 20-second time frame, but they should also avoid shifting topics or saying something that doesn't make sense within the context of the conversation.

The improvisational nature of the conversation lends itself to all kinds of role-playing in the classroom. From the earliest stages of the curriculum, teachers should provide students with opportunities to take on a role and practice responding appropriately in an unfamiliar situation. Within this context, students should learn words and phrases for opening and closing conversations, responding to questions, giving opinions, and dealing with complications.

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

The course theme for the cultural comparison task was *Persönliche und öffentliche Identität*. Students were prompted first to think about what role part-time jobs for young people play in their community (*Welche Rolle spielen Nebenjobs für Jugendliche in Ihrer Umgebung?*). In their oral presentations, students then had to compare perspectives on this question in their home community with those in a German-speaking region, and were also invited to describe their own observations, experiences, or what they had learned in school.

### *How well did students perform on this question?*

Of the four free-response tasks, Task 4, the Cultural Comparison, was the most challenging, which is borne out in the mean of 2.96 out of 5, the lowest mean of the four tasks. Students must make a two-minute oral presentation that compares two cultures based on their knowledge and experience of the German-speaking world. They must also recognize that their comparison is to be built around a specific topic, or prompt, rather than be general in nature.

### *What were common student errors or omissions?*

Most students understood the topic of the presentation and were able to talk for two minutes about part-time jobs for young people in their own communities and in German-speaking cultures. Some students, however, failed to make an adequate comparison or did not address the topic at all. Others attempted a comparison but were not able to give specific examples, or they provided inaccurate information.

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

When preparing students for the Cultural Comparison task, teachers should remind students that they must both address the topic *and* compare the two cultures. Students may want to consider beginning their presentations by addressing the German-speaking culture. Since they will naturally have more to say about their own communities, discussing their own culture later in the presentation may help them avoid running out of time before they are able to make an effective comparison.

In their presentations, students should avoid vague generalities by giving concrete examples from a specific region or city in the German-speaking world with which they are familiar. Mentioning the source of their information (a story or news article, an exchange student, or their teacher) makes their statements more convincing and adds to the overall effectiveness of the presentation.

Students can develop strategies for organizing their presentations by learning appropriate phrases to open and close the presentation and to transition between topics. At the same time, it is important that students keep their organizational statements brief in order to maximize the amount of time they have to communicate information.