



Student Performance Q&A:
2004 AP[®] English Language & Composition
Free-Response Questions

The following comments on the 2004 free-response questions for AP[®] English Language and Composition were written by the Chief Reader, David Jolliffe of DePaul University in Chicago, Illinois. 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?

Question 1 asked students to read a substantial excerpt of a letter written in 1746 by the English author Lord Chesterfield to his son traveling far from home. They were then to write an essay in which they analyzed how the rhetorical strategies Lord Chesterfield uses reveal his own values. The question called upon students to demonstrate their ability to comprehend nonfiction prose written in a period prior to the twentieth century; to understand and explain the strategies an author uses to achieve meaning, purpose, and effect with readers in a specific time and place; and to write clear, cogent, mature prose.

How well did students perform on this question?

The mean score for this question was 4.7 out of a possible nine points. The most successful essays showed evidence that the writers had read Lord Chesterfield's letter holistically and were able to see in it an inherent argument that he is making to his son. These essays, accordingly, made strong claims about the ways Chesterfield crafted the argument for his son and supported these claims with abundant and appropriate references to the primary text. The best essays recognized irony as the main rhetorical strategy employed by Chesterfield, but they also focused on Chesterfield's use of a wide range of strategies that have been examined in the scholarship on rhetorical theory and practice.

Essays that scored in the middle range often missed the irony, sometimes even characterizing Lord Chesterfield as an ideal parent giving the best possible advice to his son. These essays did

recognize the rhetorical act of the letter—students were savvy about this text being a piece of prose specifically crafted to convey meaning, purpose, and effect to a particular reader—but they often did not perceive the overall argument the letter makes. Instead, they chose to view the letter atomistically, claiming, for example, that the first part of the letter does X and the second part of the letter does Y. Moreover, the writers of essays scoring in the middle range frequently lacked the vocabulary needed to write specifically about rhetorical strategies.

Essays that scored in the low range generally showed little evidence that their writers understood either Lord Chesterfield’s values or the rhetorical strategies he uses to convey them. These essays often misconstrued his positions. When they did mention rhetorical strategies, they merely described isolated features of syntax or diction, failing to explain how these features relate to the overall meaning, purpose, or effect of the letter.

What were common student errors or omissions?

There were three common types of errors. First, many students did not notice that the text as a whole makes an argument and that its component parts contribute to its overall meaning, purpose, and effect. Second, many students failed to detect the blatant irony in Chesterfield’s letter and therefore overlooked an important rhetorical dimension of the text. Third, many students lacked a working vocabulary of concepts from rhetorical theory and practice that they might have employed in an analysis such as the one called for in this 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?

This question demonstrates (as do the other two free-response questions) that the AP English Language and Composition Exam is an exam in the theory and practice of rhetoric. Students need to learn how to describe the interactions of writer, reader, text, and context that lead to the construction of meaning, purpose, and effect in a document like Lord Chesterfield’s letter. Students need to understand the basic appeals of a rhetorically effective text—logos, ethos, and pathos—and be able to analyze how the organization and structure, diction, syntax, imagery, and figurative language of a text evoke and construct these appeals. Students need to practice reading nonfiction texts from a variety of historical periods, looking for subtleties and nuances in these texts rather than simply their propositional meaning. Finally—and *this point applies to all three questions*—students need ample opportunities to read and discuss examples of excellent nonfiction prose written for both academic and general audiences so that they can themselves develop the syntactic fluency and verbal acuity that are the hallmarks of a strong, mature prose style.

Question 2

What was the intent of this question?

Question 2 was an argument question, characterized this year by a very open topic. Students were asked to focus on a controversial local, national, or global issue with which they are familiar and then write an essay that carefully considered the opposing positions on this controversy and proposed a solution or compromise. College composition courses increasingly emphasize that students should be able to write a cogent argument that examines more than one perspective on an issue, develops a sophisticated position that draws on a range of views, and employs a strong, mature prose style. This question reflects these emphases.

How well did students perform on this question?

The mean score for this question was 4.9 out of a possible nine points. In general, students found this question quite accessible. It gave them the opportunity to construct an argument on a topic about which, ideally, they knew something. A great many students chose to write their essays about one of three contemporary topics: the war in Iraq, abortion, and gay marriage. The range of topics beyond these three, however, was incredibly wide, including, for example, the outsourcing of American jobs, the place of Ebonics in the English curriculum, the human genome project, school uniforms, and censorship of television, to name just a few.

The most successful essays responded to this prompt fully, intelligently, and fluently in four ways. First, they focused on a topic about which the student had something informed and concrete to say, eschewing broad generalizations in favor of specific facts, details, and perspectives. Second, they usually characterized both sides of the controversy equitably, trying their best to explain why the supporters and detractors of each position believe and act as they do. Third, they explained a solution that might actually solve the controversy or described a compromise that genuinely calls for both sides to give a bit in order to accommodate the opposition. Fourth, they generally evinced a strong, effective style characterized by full, clear, complete sentences and distinctive, appropriate diction.

Essays scoring in the middle range were generally less informed than the upper-range essays. The middle-range essays usually focused on a controversial topic that might have been in the news regularly, but their writers often relied on relatively broad, general characterizations of the positions that proponents and opponents held about the issue, and their compromises and solutions were frequently marked by a similar simplification of the controversy.

Essays that scored in the low range on this question showed little success in the same areas in which the successful essays excelled. The low-range essays were frequently ill informed about their topic and occasionally focused on a subject that few readers would even consider controversial. They usually failed to characterize fully the opposing positions or to develop a plausible, defensible compromise or solution. The prose of the low-range essays suggested that their writers were not in full control of their writing.

What were common student errors or omissions?

Like Question 1, this question had three common errors. First, some students were unable to come up with a controversy about which they could generate either sufficient, convincing characterizations of the opposing positions or a credible compromise or solution. Second, some students, who might have been told that all argument questions require them to agree with, disagree with, or qualify some idea or proposition, responded with largely one-sided arguments that did not rise to the requirement of openhanded inquiry embodied in the prompt. Third, some students chose to write about topics that were not very controversial.

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 can do two things to help their students succeed on argument questions like this one in the future. First, teachers should emphasize an idea that has been central to the teaching of rhetoric for the past 2,000 years; namely, that part of being good writers is being involved, informed citizens, people who are aware of important issues being discussed in their community, nation, and world and who are capable of contributing intelligently to conversations about these issues.

Effective citizen rhetoricians, therefore, should read newspapers and news magazines thoroughly, experience programming in the media that treats issues fully and fairly, and consider carefully the reasoned opinions of peers, parents, and other adults. Second, in the teaching of argumentative writing, teachers should devote attention not only to establishing a thesis and developing evidence to support it but also to acknowledging and accommodating potential objections to the thesis.

Question 3

What was the intent of this question?

Question 3 was an analytic question with a considerably different focus than Question 1. Question 3 asked students to read an excerpt from Richard Rodriguez's *Days of Obligation* in which Rodriguez explains that he is writing a book about Mexico and California and then proceeds to assay his ambiguous feelings about Mexico, the homeland of his ancestral family, and California, the state where he grew up and now lives. The prompt directed students to analyze how Rodriguez uses contrasts to explore and convey his conflicting feelings. The question, therefore, required students to demonstrate their abilities to comprehend challenging, contemporary, nonfiction prose; to understand and explain the semantic, syntactic, and lexical nuances an author employs to convey a complex idea; and to write clear, cogent, mature prose.

How well did students perform on this question?

The mean score for this question was 4.4 out of a possible nine points. There are probably at least two explanations for why this question has the lowest mean score of the three questions. First, Rodriguez's passage is rich and allusive and it presented a challenge for students who aimed to read it critically. Second, since it was the final free-response question, many students apparently ran out of time and did not attempt to respond to it.

As with Question 1, the writers of the best essays read the Rodriguez excerpt holistically rather than atomistically. The most successful essays made strong claims about Rodriguez's conflicting feelings about Mexico and California and referred to the text explicitly or implicitly to support these claims. The writers of these successful essays correctly sensed that it was impossible to find closure in Rodriguez's argument. He himself concludes "the best resolution to the debate between comedy [a concept with which Rodriguez associates California] and tragedy [which he connects to Mexico] is irresolution, since both sides can claim wisdom." Instead of trying to simplify Rodriguez's position, the writers of successful essays carefully noted how the histories, allusions, anecdotes, and connotative diction Rodriguez offers about both Mexico and California—and the textual organization and syntax with which he expresses his views—are themselves riddled with ambiguity. The writers of these essays also pointed out that Rodriguez sees a similar ambiguity in his own life and that he apparently is using the process of writing this very text to confront the personal tensions generated by this ambiguity.

Essays that scored in the middle range usually recognized the ambiguity with which Rodriguez ends the excerpt, and the writers occasionally saw that his uncertain attitudes about Mexico and California are mirrored in his own life. But the primary move that placed essays in the middle range was a simplification of Rodriguez's views about Mexico and California. Writers of middle-range essays often argued that to Rodriguez, California is X and Mexico is Y, whereas in the text, *both* Mexico and California are *both* X and Y to Rodriguez.

Essays that scored in the low range in general failed to comprehend the complexities and nuances of Rodriguez's text. The writers of these essays often made relatively limited claims about, for

example, Rodriguez’s diction or tone, without connecting those claims to the overall meaning, purpose, or effect of the text; or they merely summarized Rodriguez’s comments about Mexico and California.

What were common student errors or omissions?

In addition to the oversimplification of Rodriguez’s position, which has been noted above, a common shortcoming in many essays resulted from students’ inclination to see this question solely as a stylistic analysis question. Perhaps having been schooled to expect such a question, students frequently produced relatively predictable academic themes, with one paragraph about, for example, Rodriguez’s diction, one about his syntax, and one about his tone. These essays scored in the low range not because the students focused on these elements but generally because they failed to explain how these features contribute to, and are congruent with, Rodriguez’s meaning, purpose, and effect, and specifically because they neglected to embrace the ambiguity and complexity of the primary text.

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?

Ideally, teachers will realize—and teach to their students—that style is the third of the five traditional canons of rhetoric and that one can never adequately analyze the style of a passage without also analyzing its meaning, purpose, and effect. Teachers need to emphasize the old maxim of “form follows function” and help students learn that an author’s desire to create meaning, purpose, and effect in a text is fleshed out in that author’s decisions about the structure of the argument, organization of the text, diction, syntax, imagery, and figurative language.