



Student Performance Q&A:

2008 AP[®] English Language and Composition

Free-Response Questions

The following comments on the 2008 free-response questions for AP[®] English Language and Composition were written by the Chief Reader, Gary Hatch of Brigham Young University in Provo, Utah. 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?

This question asked students to use at least three of seven provided sources to develop a position on whether or not the United States should eliminate the penny coin. Although the penny is a common object, a part of many students' everyday experience, students were unlikely to have considered this particular issue and would therefore need to rely on the sources in order to understand the complex arguments related to this seemingly simple question. In addition to understanding and evaluating written sources, students were also asked to consider two visual sources: one representing data visually, and one providing historical information as well as an impetus for thinking about the penny as a material object.

How well did students perform on this question?

The mean score for this question was 4.62 out of a possible 9 points. This score is slightly lower than last year's mean on the debut synthesis question. Although students were no doubt well prepared for this type of question, the 2008 synthesis question, more than the 2007 question, demanded that they rely more heavily on the sources for their knowledge of the subject. Better essays showed evidence of a mind at work, and successful students were able to use the sources to develop their own position on the issue rather than allowing the sources to dominate their writing.

What were common student errors or omissions?

Students who performed poorly on this question typically committed one or more of the following errors:

- First, many students merely summarized the information they had learned from the sources without any attempt to integrate them. In short, instead of using the sources to develop a position on whether the penny should be discontinued, students relied on the sources for their knowledge of the subject and the organization of their essays. Some merely summarized the sources. Others classified them according to whether the sources took a position for or against the penny. Still others simply moved from one source to the next, making comments on each in turn.
- Second, less-successful responses merely asserted a position or presented a quotation as self-evident proof without using the information in the sources to develop the student's own argument.
- Third, in addition to other problems, some lower-half essays either used fewer than three sources or else used a source without citing it properly. Rarely did a student write an effective essay that had problems with citations, indicating that teachers are generally preparing students well for research writing and the conventions of this new question type.

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?

Student performance on this year's synthesis question suggests the following avenues for teachers in helping students prepare for future synthesis questions:

- First, teachers should help their students understand that most writing uses outside sources in one form or another, and that effective research writing develops a position in response to or in dialogue with these sources.
- Second, students need to learn that there are more ways to use a source than for merely providing examples or "support" for a view the student wants to develop. Students can engage with a source in various ways: agree, agree but for different reasons, disagree, or both agree and disagree. Students can use sources to represent different viewpoints, to illustrate a point, to extend or apply an argument, or to make connections among ideas. Sources can also provide a stimulus for thinking more deeply about the topic.
- Third, students need to learn how to incorporate source material into their own writing. They need to learn how to provide a framework for a source by introducing it, presenting it (as quotation, summary, or paraphrase), citing the source properly, and then explaining it as part of the student's own argument.
- Fourth, teachers should make students aware of the purpose of citation systems as well as their mechanics. Students need to learn how to use sources responsibly and ethically.

Question 2

What was the intent of this question?

This question asked students to consider the rhetorical strategies used by science writer John M. Barry to characterize the heroic and pioneering nature of scientific research. Students were required to consider how Barry uses elements of language to portray the qualities required of scientists: intelligence, curiosity, passion, patience, creativity, self-sufficiency, and courage.

How well did students perform on this question?

The mean score for this question was 4.18 out of a possible 9 points. The analysis question is primarily a measure of the student's skill as a critical reader, and to read successfully a student needs to understand that writers have different purposes. In his book Barry relates the history of the 1918 influenza pandemic, focusing on scientists' efforts to identify the cause and respond to the threat. Barry identifies his story as an "epic" and characterizes scientists as heroes. This passage demonstrates how skilled writers can use elements of language to reveal their attitudes toward their subjects. Successful students noted how Barry's word choice, imagery, figurative language, and selection of detail create an image of the scientist as hero.

What were common student errors or omissions?

This passage seemed deceptively simple; although students could generally understand what Barry says about science and scientists, they often struggled to explain *how* he characterizes science. Some merely summarized or commented on the passage. Often students identified a whole host of rhetorical and literary terms without explaining how these worked together to achieve a particular effect. Some students seemed determined to talk about diction, imagery, and syntax without recognizing that Barry's syntax, in particular, proves less important than other elements for explaining how he creates his image of the scientist. Some students also struggled to apply Aristotelian proofs to a passage that primarily shows how a writer allocates emphasis and directs a reader's attention.

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 take four lessons away from this year's scoring of the analysis question:

- First, they need to introduce students to a wide range of sophisticated nonfiction prose in which the position is nuanced rather than baldly stated and where the writer may be achieving more complex effects than merely defending a position.
- Second, students need to learn that style is one of the five canons of rhetoric and that writers use stylistic devices for a purpose rather than as an end in themselves. That purpose is often to allocate emphasis and to attract and hold a reader's attention.
- Third, students need to learn to read not only for *what* an author says but *how* an author says it.

- Fourth, rather than having students memorize long lists of obscure rhetorical terms, teachers may find it more productive to develop students' proficiency with a smaller set of more familiar analytical terms, such as word choice, selection of detail, tone, repetition, balance and parallelism, metaphor, or symbol. While it is certainly important to introduce students to broad rhetorical strategies, such as Aristotle's ethos, logos, and pathos, it is also important to teach students how to explain the ways these strategies and stylistic devices work together to achieve broader purposes or effects.

Question 3

What was the intent of this question?

This question called for students to compose a clear, cogent, and convincing argument and to demonstrate that they could consider opposing viewpoints as they developed their position. Students' essays had to serve two functions: to evaluate the arguments for and against corporate sponsorship of schools and to make a convincing argument for the position the student favored. The question invited students to recognize that arguments are part of conversations about an issue and that effective arguing requires one to account for other viewpoints. Students had to restate these views accurately, to evaluate the reasonableness of these positions, and to develop a position of their own in response to these views.

How well did students perform on this question?

The mean score for this question was 4.72 out of a possible 9 points. Most students had something to say about the presence of advertising in schools, and their responses to the prompt were pretty evenly divided as to whether corporate sponsorships are a boon or a menace. Some students observed that they could be both, depending upon the content of the advertisements, the financial needs of the schools, and the terms of the partnerships. Nearly every student at some point made the claim that ads are everywhere, both inside and outside of school.

Successful essays typically considered complex causes and effects, acknowledging the cultural and historical context in which corporate advertising in schools occurs. The best of these weighed the drawbacks and benefits of corporate sponsorships in terms of ethical or economic principles, considering the ethics of using students as unwitting participants in marketing research, the purposes of education, the funding priorities of our nation, and the inequitable distribution of wealth in a corporate capitalist economy.

What were common student errors or omissions?

Many of the students who struggled with this question addressed it merely in terms of immediate causes and effects. Essays in the lower half of the scoring range frequently described the drawbacks of corporate advertising only in terms of the immediate distractions or persuasive effects of ads. There were typically four kinds of mistakes on this question:

- First, students often asserted positions without providing any kind of support, beginning and ending their essays with claims such as, "Advertising has no effects on students" or "School should be a safe place that is free of corporate influence," without giving Readers any reasons to believe these claims to be valid or true.

- Second, in an attempt to understand the complexity of this issue and evaluate arguments on both sides, some students failed to develop a position of their own.
- Third, some students who presented a position offered evidence that was sketchy, imprecise, or only loosely connected with the issue. This question, in particular, did not lend itself well to literary examples.
- Fourth, the question specifically asked students to evaluate both sides of the issue as they developed their position; unfortunately, some fairly well-written arguments addressed only one side. Some essays made a token attempt to address opposing views but presented them in an abbreviated and distorted way.

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?

Responses to this year’s argument question suggest four specific pedagogical applications:

- First, teachers need to remind students to address the specific prompt. Some prompts may ask students to do more than develop a one-sided argument on a topic.
- Second, students need to learn that a sound argument is the product of circumspection. A creditable argument follows a sincere effort to understand diverse points of view, to appreciate the reasons behind various positions, and to comprehend the various interests at stake. Demonstrating the willingness and ability to engage in this important “receptive” stage of argumentation is crucial to establishing credible academic ethos.
- Third, teachers should help students understand that a sound argument differs from the mere assertion of an opinion, regardless of the degree of passion that goes into that assertion. An argument provides evidence and reasons in support of its position.
- Fourth, teachers should ask students to read widely and write about a range of topics typically debated in the public sphere. Students need to understand the type of evidence and examples typically used in such debates, recognizing that literary examples may not be the most effective.