Student Performance Q&A:

2011 AP® English Language and Composition Free-Response Questions

The following comments on the 2011 free-response questions for AP® English Language and Composition were written by the Chief Reader, David Jolliffe of the University of Arkansas at Fayetteville. These comments provide an overview of each free-response question, explain how students performed on the question, and describe 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 synthesis question examined students' ability to develop their own position on a given topic, referring to and incorporating sources as they did so. The question, moreover, called for students to demonstrate the ability to summarize, paraphrase and quote properly from sources and to cite them accurately. It asked students to consider seven sources — five texts, one graph and one cartoon — about the emerging "locavore" movement, in which people with an eye to nutrition as well as sustainability have decided to eat locally grown or produced food as much as possible. The prompt directed students to write an essay, synthesizing at least three of the sources for support, in which they identified the key issues associated with the locavore movement and examined their implications for a community that is considering becoming part of the movement.

How well did students perform on this question?

The mean score was 4.88 out of a possible 9 points. The prompt proved to be quite accessible for the great majority of the students, and the sources offered a rich array of perspectives, information and data on the locavore movement. Students who had some familiarity with the topic were able to access their prior knowledge, but doing so did not necessarily privilege them or lead them to write higher-scoring essays. The sources accompanying the prompt provided sufficient background for thoughtful students to identify the key issues associated with locavorism and to examine their implications for a community considering it.

The most successful responses accomplished those two goals forcefully and effectively: They saw that the locavore movement raised issues of economics, nutrition, taste, ecology and even morality and ethics. They unpacked their thinking, explaining to readers how these issues are embedded in the movement and how they are related. They thought about how these issues would affect a particular region and community and, therefore, whether adopting locavorism would have benefits or drawbacks that might not be evident at first glance. In short, the best responses were arguments

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that identified and weighed the issues carefully and entered into conversation with the sources in order to develop their claims.

What were common student errors or omissions?

Some students oversimplified the issues at hand, stating either that the locavore movement is good and should be adopted in a community or that it is bad and should not be adopted. Such responses did not identify and consider the issues underlying locavorism in detail.

Some students attempted to develop a well-reasoned examination of locavorism, but their logic was incomplete or uncertain. Some were overwhelmed by the sources, and the resulting essays were dominated by summary and paraphrase of the source material without developing and supporting a salient argument.

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?

Above all else, help students learn to write source-based arguments in which they control the sources and use them in support of their own thesis. Beyond that, the same suggestions offered to teachers last year are relevant this year:

- Be sure students understand that the most frequent type of writing they will do in college is source-based argumentation, in which they will be required to consider an array of sources, generate a central argument (or thesis), and develop that argument by entering into conversation with the sources. For a good overview of source-based writing in college, see Mary Kay Mulvaney, “Analytic Writing in College: Forms, Sites, and Strategies,” in David A. Jolliffe, ed., *AP English Language: Reading and Writing Analytically* (New York: The College Board, 2008): 19–42.
- Help students understand the various ways writers engage with their sources to develop a position. An inexperienced writer’s typical move is to find sources that agree with his or her position; however, an effective writer generally moves beyond the “agree with” or “disagree with” relationship with sources. Students need practice using sources to extend or counter an idea or make connections among ideas.
- Teach students how to introduce quoted, summarized and paraphrased material from sources and how to incorporate such material in their own syntax. The simple dropping in of quoted material, whether in a brief passage or a long quotation, produces jarring, ineffective writing.
- Continue emphasizing that any material students synthesize in their own positions, whether they quote it, summarize it or paraphrase it, must be cited. To prepare for the AP English Language and Composition Exam, students can practice the simplified citation method recommended by the prompt, but they should also become familiar with the more widely accepted citation styles — for example, MLA and APA — that they will need to use in college papers.
- Continue to show students how to analyze rhetorically the position and points made by nontextual sources (such as charts, graphs, pictures and cartoons), so that they are able to synthesize perspectives from these sources in their own compositions.

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Question 2

What was the intent of this question?

This question examined students' ability to engage in close reading and rhetorical analysis of a piece of nonfiction prose — that is, their ability to explain the meaning, purpose and effect of a passage and the rhetorical strategies the author employs to convey meaning, achieve purpose and create an effect. In particular, students were asked to read and analyze an address delivered by social reformer Florence Kelley, an advocate for reforming child labor laws and extending voting rights to women, to the National American Woman Suffrage Association convention in 1905. The prompt directed students to "analyze the rhetorical strategies Kelley uses to convey her message about child labor to her audience."

How well did students perform on this question?

The mean score was 4.41 out of a possible 9 points. Most students seemed to understand the rhetorical context of this prompt quite clearly: a prominent social reformer speaking about child labor abuses to a large audience composed mostly of women who supported universal women's suffrage. The most successful responses recognized Kelley's multiple purposes: to call to her audience's attention the horrible conditions under which children were being forced to labor at the time, to work for reform of child labor laws to protect these young workers, to call for the extension of voting rights to women in the United States, and, in the meantime, to enlist the support of males who *could* vote in the child-labor-law reform movement.

Having demonstrated understanding of Kelley's audience and purposes, the successful responses could then proceed to analyze the strategies Kelley uses to accomplish the purposes. These successful essays explained how patterns of repetition and parallelism, along with evocative diction and figurative language, complemented statistical data to appeal to emotion as well as to logic. They placed Kelley's speech in a meaningful historical and social context that they used to enhance their analysis, and they did so with admirable facility with, and control of, language and voice.

What were common student errors or omissions?

Weaker responses stopped short of seeing the full range of Kelley's speech, limiting themselves, for example, to a narrow focus on her anger at child labor practices. They asserted or described *what* Kelley said or did rather than analyzing *how* her strategies worked to further her purposes.

Some students veered into argumentative writing, taking positions on child labor themselves.

Some students also engaged in naming and listing rhetorical devices they found in the speech without addressing the "so what" question: How do these rhetorical devices and strategies help Kelley flesh out her central argument and achieve her purposes with this audience?

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?

- Develop a stronger understanding of what rhetorical analysis is, see its connection to traditional close reading (noting its similarities and differences, of course), and consciously teach close-reading, rhetorical analysis strategies to students.

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- Above all else, emphasize to students that every analysis is actually an argument: Students must make claims about what they see as the text's central argument, its purpose, its appeals and its tone, and then they must cite specific evidence from the text to support those claims. This basic requirement entails being sure that students understand the basic components of any rhetorical transaction: speaker/writer, audience/reader, rhetorical purpose, tone, stance and appeals.
- Understand and teach that *logos*, *ethos* and *pathos* are not separate entities that can be dropped into a text at will. *Logos* is the central appeal; the ways a text appeals to *ethos* and *pathos* must grow out of its appeal to *logos*. Moreover, a text does not have *logos*, *ethos* and *pathos*. These are analytic categories: A person reading a text perceives (i.e., argues) that a text appeals to a reader's affinity for logic and logical structure (*logos*); a text appeals to a reader's feeling that the writer is credible and of good character (*ethos*); a text appeals to an audience's emotions or stages of life (*pathos*). In other words, a student must *argue* that a text appeals to *logos*, *ethos* or *pathos* and then support his or her argument with examples from the text's organization and style that the student believes manifest these appeals.

Question 3

What was the intent of this question?

This question examined students' ability to write an effective, compelling argument based on a prompt, drawing on evidence from their own experiences, observations and reading to support their central claim or thesis. In particular, students were presented with an excerpt from Thomas Paine's 1791 book, *Rights of Man*, in which Paine argues that, despite the diversity of its population, the United States is a nation in which "all the parts are brought into cordial unison." The question directed students to "write an essay that examines the extent to which Paine's characterization of America holds true today."

How well did students perform on this question?

The mean score was 4.44 out of a possible 9 points. The prompt offered a wide range of issues students could consider, relating Paine's view of America in 1791 to their own perceptions of American society and culture today. Students chose to write, for example, about immigration, diversity, religion, politics, education, economics and gender issues. The students who focused on how the form of government influenced the United States then and now were generally more successful than students who simply made personal observations about oppression or injustice or those who chose to write only about freedom of religion or immigration issues.

Accomplished responses, moreover, tended to draw evidence from various sources: history, politics and current events. Students writing these essays were knowledgeable about pivotal historical issues as well as about contemporary events and controversies and were skilled at linking their evidence directly to the argument they were building in the essay. Some students chose to take a satirical approach to the task, mocking ways that today's America has not lived up to Paine's early view. These essays for the most part were well developed, with a distinctively sharp and perceptive voice. When personal examples were used effectively to develop the argument, they were used purposefully and strategically. Finally, the best responses displayed ample evidence of controlled, sophisticated writing.

What were common student errors or omissions?

As with argument questions in the past, many students struggled with incorporating appropriate, compelling evidence that would effectively contribute to their arguments. In many essays that

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earned scores in the lower range, students did provide some type of evidence, but it was generally weak or did not corroborate the argument being constructed.

The use of literary references, for the most part, did not work well with this prompt. Some students tried to fit references to novels into their arguments but did so with little success. Many students, moreover, used only historical evidence without referencing how Paine's characterization was true today.

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?

- Consider incorporating in classes more discussions of current social issues and the impact they have on modern society. The more students know about the world around them, the more material they will have at their disposal when they work to create sound arguments.
- Classroom instruction might focus on guiding students through the process of establishing what is suitable evidence and how to use it strategically — whether it be historical, political, pop-cultural or related to current events.
- Classroom instruction might focus on close reading of the prompt and passage. Students might benefit from rewriting the prompt in their own words or circling or underlining words in the prompt that direct them to their task.
- By building students' evidentiary toolbox, teachers will help them learn how to expand their argument with more significant and less obvious examples. (Remind students that the first thing that pops into their minds will probably be the first thing that pops into the minds of 90 percent of the other students.) Show students how to dig deeper into the prompt for other approaches.

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