



Student Performance Q&A: 2013 AP® English Language Free-Response Questions

The following comments on the 2013 free-response questions for AP® English Language and Composition were written by the Chief Reader, Mary Trachsel of the University of Iowa, Iowa City, Iowa. 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 provided students with seven sources to draw from in composing essays that “examine the factors a group or agency should consider in memorializing an event or person *and* in creating a monument.” Students were instructed to respond to the prompt with an **argument** supported by a synthesis of material from at least three of the sources. Students were also required to clearly and accurately cite the sources they used in formulating their responses.

As always, this year’s synthesis question asked students to integrate reading and writing skills. Students had to read and comprehend six verbal texts and one pictorial text and consider how these texts might constitute a “conversation” about the question posed by the prompt. Next, students had to **use** the sources to help them formulate their own arguments in response to the question. While the direction to “examine the factors” might not seem to call for an argument, the prompt clarifies the argumentative task with the verb “should consider.” Students’ arguments, in other words, had to take a position on the responsibilities a group or agency must take into consideration when undertaking the two-fold task of deciding who or what to memorialize *and* how to memorialize this subject. Students had to substantiate their positions with information or perspectives offered in at least three of the sources; they were also free to draw from their own experiences and observations to supplement their use of sources to explain and support their positions. Finally, students had to demonstrate responsible attribution skills by clearly identifying the sources of material they used to help them formulate their responses. The direction to “use the sources to illustrate and support your reasoning” was intended to underscore the centrality of the student’s own argument in the synthesis essay. “Using” sources entails more than simply quoting or paraphrasing and citing sources and surrendering responsibility for formulating an argument to the sources themselves.

How well did students perform on this question?

The mean score of this question was 4.42 out of a possible 9 points.

What were common student errors or omissions?

- **Misreading the prompt:** This year’s synthesis question featured a two-pronged prompt, asking students to argue that certain factors should be taken into consideration “in memorializing an event or person *and* in creating a monument.” Although the free-response question emphasized this two-fold task by italicizing the word “*and*” in the instructions, some low-scoring essays addressed only the second half of the prompt without considering the question of who or what should be memorialized.
- **Over-reliance on the language and arguments of others:** As in previous years, another common flaw among lower-half synthesis essays was students’ over-reliance on the sources at the expense of developing their own points of view and their own well-considered *arguments*. Lower-scoring papers tended to make heavy use of direct quotation—of the prompt and of the sources. These students interpreted the directive of the prompt to “*use the sources*” as a directive to quote or paraphrase the sources without considering their contributions to the student’s own argument.

The best of these lower-half papers exhibited solid summary skills; the writers clearly comprehended the semantic meaning of the source texts. Their preferred organizational strategy was additive: for example, summary of Source A followed by summary of Source D followed by summary of Source E. These relationships with the texts were often limited to simple agreement or disagreement, approval, or disapproval.

- **Ineffective use of examples and illustrations:** Middle-scoring essays demonstrated students’ ability to find and use appropriate examples to support and illustrate their claims. These examples took the forms of:
 - 1) textual support drawn from the sources
 - 2) relevant personal experiences or first-hand observations
 - 3) relevant historical knowledge.

The lowest-scoring essays did not use examples at all to support their claims, **or** they chose ineffective examples. Inappropriate use of literary examples was a fairly common form of this general problem. Students who used literary examples ineffectively often appeared to be “squeezing” a literary work to make it fit as support for a broad generalization about memorializing people and events and/or designing monuments. Other ineffective uses of textual, historical, literary, or personal examples seemed to result from misreadings of the prompt and/or the sources.

- **Failure to synthesize:** The intellectual operation students must demonstrate in response to the prompt involves all three of the following components:
 - 1) reading: comprehension and consideration of multiple sources of information about and perspectives on the question students must answer
 - 2) synthesized argument: the student’s own “informed” response to the question *uses* sources *in combination* with one another. Graff & Birkenstein offer a helpful framing of synthetic writing in terms of *conversation*; writers must first listen/read to orient themselves to an ongoing conversation before entering it themselves. When they do enter, they should be able to plot their own arguments with reference to other points of view and sources of information within the conversation

3) citation: an “information trail” that clearly and completely documents how the ongoing conversation has informed the student’s own argument.

Failure to perform the second step—to synthesize sources—kept many students from earning a score on the upper-half of the scale. Without considering the sources in combination, students were limited to additive use of the sources—especially the aforementioned “stringing together” of examples.

- **Poor mechanical control of standard written English and incomprehensible handwriting:** Student writers whose grammar and mechanics were so flawed that readers had difficulty following the argument, or whose handwriting was indecipherable scored at the bottom end of the scale.

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?

- Integrate the teaching of writing with the teaching of reading. In the synthesis question, as in all the other questions on the exam (MCs and FROs alike), students *must begin by reading and understanding the question*. While analysis prompts, like the multiple choice questions, require students to perform close reading of single, isolated texts, synthesis prompts require them to read and reflect upon multiple texts (and their introductory materials) in combination. Students need to read all the source texts with a focus on the question; they must annotate, take notes, or otherwise work to retain multiple points of view and pieces of information in formulating a response. Beyond reading the source materials, having a broad and varied reserve of background reading experiences in academic disciplines such as literature, history, science, politics, and economics, as well as from journalism and other “nonacademic” nonfiction texts, increases the likelihood that student writers can draw effective vocabulary terms, examples, or other forms of support for their arguments from their reading. Encourage students to read and write as components of conversations or dialogues on printed pages and screens. One method of reinforcing this understanding of reading and writing is to read and respond to student writing as part of a teacher/student dialogue about ideas and reasoning. Finally, extensive reading may in large measure compensate for restricted first-hand experience and observation.
- Give students practice in reading for ideas, principles, and arguments rather than words, statements, and “facts.” Synthesizing multiple texts requires students to process language and information at levels of abstraction that transcend the concrete particulars of any single text. In this year’s sources, for instance, the excerpts on Mt. Rushmore, the Crazy Horse monument-in-process, and the Holocaust Museum all raise questions about monuments’ function as arguments about history, not only about who or what deserves to be remembered by successive generations, but also about whose representation should be used to prompt what kind of memory among the members of which viewing audience? And to what end? The students whose essays received the highest scores were able to place the questions within a *distal* framing—one that considered the questions of the prompt in terms of history, cultural and personal memory, nationalism, or the educational function of monuments.
- Give students reading and writing exercises and assignments that require them to practice minimizing their dependence on direct quotation as a means of representing the positions of others. Help students discover the particular words or phrases that reveal an authors’ core attitudes, beliefs, or logic; help students isolate and use particular assumptions and facts in a source rather than quoting at length. Ask students to practice introducing their outside sources by explaining how they function in the student’s own argument; this should help students become

less reliant on the words of their sources and more focused on how these sources contribute to the ongoing conversation.

- Stress to students that the skills they are required to demonstrate in both of the other FROs are also called for in the synthesis question. Students must not only comprehend but also analyze and critique their sources; in composing a response to the question they must formulate their own arguments—take positions and justify them.
- Require students to write frequently. Teach them to use a style book or a grammar handbook to correct errors and develop control in the written expression of increasingly complex ways of thinking. As part of preparation for a handwritten test, they should practice handwriting enough to ensure legibility to an audience of teachers. Illegible handwriting seemed to be more of a problem than in previous years.

Question 2

What was the intent of this question?

Question 2, the analysis question, provides an opportunity for students to demonstrate their practical understanding of rhetorical analysis. Like the synthesis question, the analysis question requires students to integrate reading and writing skills. Rhetorical reading entails comprehending both the **meaning** and **purpose** of an author’s **argument** and its intended **audience(s)**, and students are asked to demonstrate rhetorical comprehension of a text by explaining how the author’s rhetorical decisions promote or hinder successful accomplishment of the purpose. In short, rhetorical analysis means explaining not only **what** writers are saying but also **why** and **how** they are saying it.

This year’s analysis question featured a passage from Richard Louv’s *Last Child in the Woods* that sounds an alarm about the increasing separation between humans and the natural world. The passage opens by mentioning advances in genetic engineering that increase nature’s potential as a medium for corporate advertising. Louv then recounts an anecdote in which a car salesman pressures one of his friends to equip her vehicle with a backseat video screen and asks, “Why do so many people no longer consider the physical world worth watching?” In answer to this question, he presents a nostalgic account of the car trips of yesteryear when “children’s early understanding of how cities and nature fit together was gained from the backseat,” and he imagines a collective “we” telling “our” grandchildren “We actually *looked out the car window*.”

This year’s analysis asked students to discern an *implicit* argument directed to audiences far less immediate and concrete than Kennedy’s message and audiences in last year’s prompt. Louv’s “we” is a generational descriptor, separating his primary audience from the generation of readers represented by students taking the exam, a generation for whom backseat video screens have become commonplace. This year’s students were therefore positioned as eavesdroppers on a conversation conducted by their elders about young people’s changed relationship to the natural world. Louv conveys his message indirectly, by describing a brave new world in which butterfly wings can be designed to carry corporate logos and in which children cannot imagine entertaining themselves by looking out the car window, much less interacting directly with nature.

How well did students perform on this question?

The mean score of this question was 4.22 out of a possible 9 points.

What were common student errors or omissions?

- **Misreading the prompt or passage:** As in the synthesis question, students whose analysis essay responses received scores in the mid range and low end of the scale presented simplistic readings of Louv’s argument (e.g., Nature is good and technology is bad; The past was good but

the present is bad). The weakest essays appeared to be based on misreadings of the prompt; instead of analyzing how Louv targeted his audience and developed his argument to advance his purpose, they substituted simpler tasks, such as summarizing, agreeing, or disagreeing with his argument. Many low-scoring essays did not discern Louv’s implicit argument or the implied audience. These essays accurately noted Louv’s claim that humans are increasingly separated from nature, but they failed to note why Louv might be pointing this out and to whom.

- **“Where’s Waldo?” approach to the passage:** As in years past, many essays receiving lower half scores addressed the analysis prompt as a seek-and-find exercise that this year’s Analysis QL described as “predatory reading.” Students who used this approach often produced formulaic essays that identified two or more (usually three) literary tropes or figures (such as alliteration, repetition, parallelism, metaphor, analogy, or vivid diction—and sometimes more exotic ones, such as asyndeton) and asserted vaguely, with little, if any, explanation or support, that these tropes “enhanced” or “highlighted” Louv’s message. These essays generally failed to consider if or how these figures worked in the development of a purposeful argument. Indeed, in focusing on surface-level forms, many of these student writers overlooked Louv’s argument altogether.
- **Failure to apprehend implicit argument:** This year’s passage did not present an explicit argument to a clearly defined audience for an obvious purpose. Because Louv advanced his argument implicitly, through anecdote and hypothetical speculation, students had to infer Louv’s position, purpose, and intended audience. They had to pay attention, for example, to Louv’s use of first-person plural when speculating about how grandparents would explain the quaint habit of watching the world through the windows of a car. They had to position themselves among Louv’s readers, not as parents and peers, but as members of a younger generation who have forsaken the car window for the backseat video screen, and for whom virtual reality is more familiar than the natural world.
- **Misunderstanding the terms and concepts of rhetorical analysis:** Some students whose essays received lower-half scores employed the terminology of rhetorical analysis (e.g., *ethos*, *logos*, *pathos*), but demonstrated inaccurate or unclear understanding of the terms’ meaning and therefore produced analyses that were confusing and unconvincing. These essays often contained unexplained and unsupported assertions about the presence and generic function of rhetorical strategies.

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?

- Reading instruction in the AP® English Language and Composition course should help students understand written language as transactional. In addition to understanding *what* a writer *says* in a text (semantic meaning) and *how* the writer *says* it (syntactic structure), they need to consider *what* a writer is attempting to *do* through the text—what consequences the writer hopes to bring about as a result of the presenting the text to one or more readers (pragmatic meaning). Students need to understand the difference between literary and rhetorical analysis. The former is focused on language as an artistic medium and is therefore concerned with style and craft; the latter is focused on language as an instrument or medium of social interaction.
- Avoid introducing arcane terminology (including *ethos*, *logos*, *pathos*, and *mythos*) until students have a firm understanding of rhetoric as language in action, performing work in the world. An AP® English Language and Composition course does not need to introduce names of stylistic tropes and figures or fallacious arguments in order for students to analyze the rhetorical choices a writer makes in an effort to reinforce or change how a reader thinks or to prompt a reader to adopt a particular course of action.

- Demonstrate rhetorical analysis in your own responses to student writing. Comment on how students position their intended audiences and on whether and how they effectively present their cases to these audiences. Teacher responses should give students a sense of how a critical and engaged reader reacts to their arguments. Emphasize the centrality of rhetorical purpose in student writing. Ask students to articulate how they want their texts to affect readers—and to describe those readers precisely (i.e., not “the general public” or “anyone interested in health” but “property owners who use toxic chemicals to maintain the beauty of their lawns.”) Design writing tasks that enable and encourage students to produce purposeful writing in an academic setting. Assign and discuss reading materials that have a real-world purpose.
- If constrained by state or district requirements to teach AP[®] English Language and Composition in conjunction with American or English Literature, look for sections of literary works in which characters or personae use language in an effort to accomplish their purposes in the imaginative realm of the literary text. Use these sections as vehicles for discussing rhetorical practices.

Question 3

What was the intent of this question?

This year’s argument prompt raised the question, “What does it mean to own something?” followed by a brief account of three Western philosophers’ views on ownership. Students were then directed to “think about the differing views of ownership” and to “explain your position on the relationship between ownership and sense of self,” drawing support for their arguments from reading, experience, or observation.

The question was intended to provide an opportunity for students to demonstrate their rhetorical skills by formulating convincing, original arguments — articulating claims and substantiating them with appropriate and sufficient evidence and explanation. The positions taken by Plato, Aristotle, and Sartre on the meaning of “ownership” were provided in the prompt to “jump start” students’ thinking about the abstract concepts they needed to juggle in formulating their arguments: ownership and sense of self. To argue successfully, students needed to ascend to an even higher level of abstraction — to consider the “relationship” between the abstract concepts of ownership and sense of self. By requiring students to think and write at this level of abstraction, the prompt was intended to elicit students’ skills in defining and defending the terms of their arguments; they needed to clarify their understandings of ownership and sense of self as they asserted their positions on how these two concepts are related. While the question demanded abstract thought, successfully defining and explaining the terms of their arguments typically required students to demonstrate the ability to present abstractions in terms of concrete examples and illustrations.

How well did students perform on this question?

The mean score of this question was 4.35 out of a possible 9 points.

What were common student errors or omissions?

- **Misreading the prompt:** Students sometimes earned lower-half scores because they misunderstood the kind of argument specified by the prompt—one that asserted and explained a particular relationship between ownership and a sense of identity. Misreadings led some students to agree or disagree with one of the three positions mentioned in the prompt or to formulate a definition of ownership or sense of self without considering the relationship between the two.
- **Exclusively proximal framing of the prompt:** While some students formulated “adequate” responses to the prompt by examining the relationship between ownership and sense of self exclusively within the realm of their own experience (e.g., explaining how ownership of prom dresses, athletic clothing, cars, and cell phones marked high school in-group identity) “effective”

responses usually acknowledged how ownership and sense of identity were connected in the broader, more distal contexts, such as capitalist and communist cultures, or pondered the cultural challenges property ownership poses to environmental policy activists.

- **“Static” arguments:** Static arguments resulted from adherence to a rigid formula for writing an argument based on the five-paragraph theme. These arguments are “static” when all of the examples repeat the same task: supporting the simple thesis. These essays do not “unfold” or “develop” a line of argument, but reassert a single point. Their static nature is especially evident in a conclusion that simply restates the introductory thesis, often verbatim.
- **Assertions without support:** These low-scoring essays tended to introduce multiple assertions with the introductory phrase “I think...” or “I believe...” While these students understood the task of taking a position, they did not distinguish between an opinion and an argument.
- **Inappropriate use of literary examples:** While some students made effective arguments supported primarily by literary examples, many were not able to use this strategy successfully. Literary examples often seemed forced, grounded in questionable readings that failed to develop the student’s position on the relationship between ownership and sense of self. Many students who attempted to use literary examples failed to acknowledge the special status of literary “evidence.”

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?

- Encourage students to read exam prompts carefully. It may help them to annotate the prompts—for instance, underlining imperative verbs and their objects in the prompt in order to identify the crux of the assignment.
- Encourage students to read and learn about the world beyond their immediate sphere of action. Students who know more about the arts, history, science, politics, economics, law, and philosophy do better on the argument question because they have reserves of knowledge to draw from in formulating a response. Encourage students to keep up with news developments around the world. In discussing these events, raise questions about how current events have developed out of the past.
- Help students understand the limitations of the five-paragraph theme. While it is a useful organizing device, it is by no means the only way, nor is it always the best way to structure an essay response. Expose students to a variety of forms—for example, those that accommodate inductive reasoning or implicit argument. The analysis passage in this year’s exam is one such example of an alternative form.
- Emphasize the two-part nature of argument: claim and support. Students need to understand the difference between an opinion (claim only) and an argument (claim and reasons/evidence/appeals). In reading arguments, ask students to identify claims and kinds of support by considering such questions as these: What does this writer want me to accept as right or true? Why does this writer think I should accept this claim? Students also need practice in selecting appropriate support when making an argument for a given purpose and audience.
- Teachers who are required to combine the teaching of AP® English Language and Composition with the teaching of literature should make sure their students understand the special status of imaginative literature as support for real-world claims. While literary works may illustrate values, moral dilemmas, character traits, etc., they reflect or question cultural norms obliquely. Literary works are cultural artifacts, not empirical reports or “true” representations of human behavior. They are useful to illustrate or raise questions, but they do not map directly onto reality.