



Student Performance Q&A: 2014 AP[®] English Language Free-Response Questions

The following comments on the 2014 free-response questions for AP[®] English Language and Composition were written by the Chief Reader, Mary Trachsel, University of Iowa. They give an overview of each free-response question and describe 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, the synthesis question, opened with a brief account of differing ways to assess the value of a college education in the context of rising unemployment among college graduates. Students were instructed to read six short sources, one of them containing a visual text, and to “use” them to develop their own arguments about whether college is worth its cost. Source A was a book excerpt that made a case for preferring hands-on trade labor over the cubicle office work many college are destined for after graduation; Source B extolled the multifaceted values (economic, civic, personal) of a liberal arts education over more specialized career-focused higher education; Source C, the visual text, charted the downward trend of college graduates’ salaries from 2000 to 2010; Source D argued that a college education is a wise, long-term financial investment; Source E gave an account of \$100,000 fellowships offered by one of the founders of PayPal to entice students to be mentored by Silicon Valley innovators instead of attending college; and Source F listed public survey responses to a series of questions on people’s beliefs about the values of college education and the qualities that best equip individuals for employment. Students were further asked to cite the sources they used in their arguments, identifying them either by author or by letters assigned to the sources. This question was intended to elicit students’ performance of several skills in combination: critical reading of the six sources, synthesis of information and perspectives drawn from three or more of the sources, construction and articulation of a source-informed argument evaluating the worth of college, and accurate citation of sources. This question, more than some of the synthesis questions from years past, invited students to augment the sources by drawing from their own experience and observations of college costs, educational and social opportunities, and financial as well as other outcomes. In “using” the sources to “develop” their arguments, students were not constrained to use sources only as support. In addition to providing support, for instance, sources could provoke an argument or offer opposing positions that students could consider and respond to in refining their own arguments.

Students were told to “avoid merely summarizing the sources,” in hopes that they would *analyze* the individual sources and *put them in conversation with one another* in the process of constructing their own arguments. Many students accomplished this by using Source D’s account of the widening gap between starting wages for workers with and without a college education to critique Source C’s report that salaries

for college graduates had declined during the recession; Source D enabled these students to point out that salaries for workers without a college education had declined even more precipitously during the same period. Similarly, many students used sources A, B, and E to develop an account of noneconomic educational values not acknowledged by Sources C and D. Some students successfully employed rhetorical analysis of the sources, for instance, by noting that the author of Source B, who advocated for liberal arts education, was himself the president of a liberal arts college and therefore personally and professionally invested in his argument, while the cofounder of PayPal, though he disparaged college as a “default” choice, had himself benefitted in a number of ways from his own college education at Stanford.

The prompt also directed students to make their own arguments the focus of their essays. That is, they were expected to use the sources to develop their own arguments, not to summarize or interpret the arguments in the sources as ends in themselves, nor to agree or disagree with one or more of the sources. Because their own arguments were to be central to their essays, students needed to explain their reasoning as they encountered the sources and constructed their arguments.

How well did students perform on this question?

The mean score on Question 1 was 4.65 on a 9-point scale. As is often the case, this was the highest among the mean scores for the three questions this year — .89 points higher than the mean score for analysis and .07 points higher than the mean score for argument.

What were common student errors or omissions?

Prominent among student errors and omissions were failure to *use* the sources and failure to *synthesize* the sources.

One type of low-scoring essay was the heartfelt personal response that barely referenced the sources. Instead of using sources to explain a reasoned response, these essays largely ignored the sources, as the students devoted their energies to emotional expression. Eager anticipation of college life, assertions of the American dream, and complaints about oppressively high college costs were especially common emotional arguments and received scores of 4 or lower if. As this year’s synthesis question leader reported, students did not somehow “tether” their feelings to “regard for the supplied sources.”

Another type of low-scoring essay offered what the synthesis question leader described as “a long-winded source tour.” These responses were often lengthened by extensive quotation and paraphrase but took the form of source reports rather than source-based arguments. The student writers of these essays did not *synthesize* the sources, but rather summarized them individually, offering each summary or quotation as a separate piece of evidence to support a chosen response to the question: Is college worth its costs?

Essays that failed to use and/or synthesize the sources were *inadequate* responses to the question, thus scoring in the lower half (4 or below) of the 9-point scale. Successful responses to the synthesis prompt were firmly grounded in careful reading and collective interpretation of the sources, and some especially successful essays coupled reasoned responses to the sources with emotional investment in the argument. Essays scored as “adequate” (6–7) or “effective” (8–9) exhibited careful reading of the prompt and the sources, taking direction from the prompt to “evaluate” the costs and/or benefits of college. Successful essay responses weighed of the value of a comprehensive education, or decried the continuing escalation in college expenses in difficult economic circumstances, or embraced alternatives to the established-but-expensive college path.

As noted in a question from the audience at this year’s meet-the-committee event at the exam reading, the wording of this year’s prompt was not entirely felicitous. The prompt somewhat clumsily tells students to “evaluate whether” college is worth its costs. Teachers familiar with Bloom’s taxonomy will recognize “evaluation” as a higher-order mode of cognition, and, indeed, the synthesis prompt is intended as an invitation to students to demonstrate complex critical thinking. We might have more clearly conveyed this intention with different wording — for instance, “explain the value of a college education” or “evaluate

college in terms of its costs and benefits.” The most adept respondents seemed to interpret the prompt in this 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?

It’s impossible to underestimate the important role AP English Language and Composition plays in preparing students for college-level reading. Students who read well generally do well on the synthesis essay. In preparing for the synthesis exam question, students’ time is best invested in regular reading of a wide variety of nonfiction texts. Students should practice reading **rhetorically** — asking what intentions motivate the writer or speaker to produce the text, and **reflectively** — asking how they themselves respond to the text and why they respond as they do. Constant, continuous practice of rhetorical and reflective reading skills should prepare students for the reading demands of college; students need to read fluently in order to complete the amount of reading their college courses will demand; they need to read flexibly across disciplines, media, and text types; and they need to read synthetically, seeking connections and disconnections across a growing number and variety of sources.

Many students come to their college composition courses with practice in two general types of academic reading skills: reading for literary appreciation and reading for retention of information. Literary reading instruction often emphasizes formal features of language used as an artistic medium — the sounds and rhythms of oral language; the metaphors and symbols of poets and storytellers; the genres of drama, poetry, novels and short stories. Mnemonic (memory based) reading instruction emphasizes retention of discreet units of information such as students might need to produce in short-answer test questions.

College and AP English Language and Composition courses and the essay questions on the exam are intended to cultivate a different, more encompassing type of reading — asking students to assume the inquiring stance of critical thinkers. These classes ask students to read with the following kinds of questions in mind:

- What is this text doing?
- Who is speaking or writing?
- What’s the message?
- For whom is this message intended?
- What circumstances brought about this message?
- What is supposed to happen as a result of communicating this message?
- How might different recipients receive this message?
- How do I respond to this message?
- Why do I respond this way?

To foster this general type of reading strategy, AP English Language and Composition courses can emphasize functional texts — texts that are obviously intended to do certain kinds of work in the world. Examples of such texts include advertisements, political campaign speeches, editorials, public service announcements, legal arguments, proposals, and solicitation letters.

Question 2

What was the intent of this question?

Question 2 presented students with a short letter written by Abigail Adams in 1810 to her son, John Quincy Adams, who, at his parents' urging, had accompanied his father on a diplomatic trip to France. Students were directed to read the letter carefully and then write an essay analyzing "the rhetorical strategies Adams uses to advise her son." Finally, students were directed to support their analyses with specific references to the text. The intent of this question was to provide students with an opportunity to demonstrate their close reading skills (applied to a pre-20th-century text), to discern Abigail Adams' rhetorical purposes, and to explain how she used written language upon a particular occasion in an effort to accomplish those purposes. The choice of the term "rhetorical strategies" rather than "rhetorical devices" was intended to emphasize the priority of *function over form* in rhetorical analysis. The prompt was meant to guide students away from "figure hunting" (i.e., identifying metaphors, assonance, synecdoche, etc.) and toward an account of how Adams intended her letter to function as a means of convincing her son to assume the perspective and embark upon the course of action she was urging him to take. Part of the rhetorical analysis task is constructing the rhetorical context in which language performs its function. In this case, students were helped to construct the context by the date of the letter and by a brief account in the prompt of the writer and recipient of the letter and the historical moment in which the letter was written. Students could also draw upon their own historical knowledge or their understanding of family relationships or class values to supplement this sketch of the context. In requiring students to refer specifically to the text, the prompt invited students to demonstrate their abilities to select and use appropriate textual evidence to illustrate and support the assertions they made about Adams' rhetorical strategies.

How well did students perform on this question?

The mean score on the analysis prompt was 3.76 on a 9-point scale. As has often been the case in the past, this was the lowest scoring of the three essay questions — .89 points lower than the mean score for synthesis and .83 points lower than the mean score for argument.

What were common student errors or omissions?

The historical context of the passage created potential problems for some students and opportunities for others. Students with a weak grasp of American and European history sometimes stumbled into misreadings, based either on the faulty assumption that John Quincy Adams was himself acting as a diplomat (here, a parenthetical notation in the prompt clarifying his age at the time would have been helpful) or on the assumption that the "calamities," "tyranny," and "invaded liberties" Adams mentioned were occurring in France. The mislabeling of the not yet existent United States in the prompt (John Quincy Adams' father was described as a U.S. diplomat) may have encouraged those with a weak grasp of history to think that the American Revolution had already ended and that the French Revolution (still nine years away) had begun. While students with a strong grasp of history were generally better able to contextualize Abigail Adams' letter and identify the larger purpose behind her rhetorical strategies, knowledge of history did not in itself generate upper-level essays, as the task was rhetorical analysis, not historical summary. Similarly, students who knew of Abigail Adams' role as an early proponent of women's rights sometimes unsuccessfully sought to explain feminist advocacy in her letter to her son. The effects of the specific historical setting of the passage on students' understanding of the letter's larger purpose underscores the need for the development committee to carefully consider the contextual information provided for future analysis prompts, particularly those that are historically remote from students' own experience and observation.

While historical knowledge may have contributed to some students' relative success in rhetorically analyzing Adams' letter, a more telling distinction between the upper- and lower-half essays was students' understanding of rhetorical analysis. Stronger students identified rhetorical strategies clearly and

effectively analyzed how they were being used individually and in concert to persuade young John Quincy Adams to regard his trip to France as an educational and political opportunity despite the hardships it entailed. Successful students noted how Abigail Adams invoked her authority as a loving parent who wanted the best for her son; they noted that her allusion to Cicero was intended to instill in her son a sense of himself as an actor on the stage of world history; they observed the mother's appeal to her son's sense of filial piety and the logic of her argument that trying times produce heroic figures. These students went beyond the mere identification of tropes to an analysis of Adams' attempted persuasion as a transaction between the writer and the recipient of the letter. Indeed, many of the best essays didn't use the terminology of rhetorical tropes, not even the popular *ethos*, *logos*, and *pathos*. Instead, the student writers of these successful analyses demonstrated and clearly articulated a conceptual understanding of rhetorical strategies used in an effort to bring about a particular effect on a particular audience in a particular rhetorical situation.

Less successful students sometimes attempted a literary analysis of the passage, focusing on its repetitions, metaphors, and allusions without recognizing the rhetorical purposes behind those structures. This was especially true of the discussion of Adams' use of the river metaphor. Some students wrote perfectly sound interpretations of what the metaphor meant, yet failed to explain the effect the metaphor might have had on John Quincy Adams, Abigail's audience and the object of her attempted persuasion. Other students who had a general grasp of Adams' rhetorical strategies in the letter turned to a mere listing or description of these strategies without connecting them to her purpose. Occasionally students presented a full lexicon of clearly described rhetorical terminology without taking the essential next step of analyzing how those elements functioned as parts of a persuasive strategy in the particular context of Adams' letter. Finally, some of the least successful students resorted to mere summary of Adams' assertions.

Some students misread the passage or imposed faulty assumptions on what they read. One fairly common misreading, the view of Abigail Adams as remorseful and apologetic for having sent her son to France, apparently stemmed from a failure to recognize the subjunctive mood of the final sentence in the opening paragraph, "If I had thought your reluctance arose from proper deliberation, or that you were capable of judging what was most for your own benefit, I should not have urged you to accompany your father and brother when you appeared so averse to the voyage." More successful students understood this sentence to be articulating a position they sometimes described as "mother knows best." Another misreading, possibly keyed to an isolated sentence in the second paragraph ("You, however, readily submitted to my advice and, I hope, will never have occasion yourself, nor give me reason, to lament it."), identified Adams as a mother who was worried that her son might be misbehaving in France.

Stronger essays usually demonstrated a more holistic understanding of the letter in its entirety. These essays identified at least three strategies and explained their interaction in the service of Abigail Adams' larger purpose of reconciling John Quincy Adams to his journey and advising him to embrace it as a means of moral and intellectual growth. Some very strong essays, however, were able to develop full, cogent analyses focused on just two of the strategies, but those usually chose two that were representative of the larger range and developed their analyses with particular fullness. Probably the fundamental distinction between stronger and weaker essays was the students' success or failure in comprehending the double edge of Adams' overall strategy. The most successful essays recognized that Adams both gently admonished her son for his initial reluctance to go on the journey, and in the process invoked her superior parental experience and authority, and extended a vision of his own possible heroic role in the tumultuous events that surrounded him by invoking comparisons to Cicero and appealing to his own emerging manly virtue. Weaker essays tended to acknowledge only one side of this dual strategy and then exaggerated that side to present Abigail Adams as either the quintessential doting mom or the worst of emasculating harpies. In distorting Abigail Adams' purpose, tone, and strategies in this way, those essays proved themselves inadequate to the task.

Overall, this exam question yielded lower than normal scores and many relatively long essays that failed to develop coherent rhetorical analyses. Several explanations have been proposed for these disappointing results: 1) the prompt itself might have prevented some unfortunate misreadings by specifying John

Quincy Adams's age and by providing clearer information about the historical context; 2) students are less and less familiar with language written before the 20th century and thus found the archaic formalities of Adams' 18th-century prose inaccessible; 3) AP English Language courses themselves are continuing to teach traditional literary analysis, with its focus on aesthetic forms of language, instead of rhetorical analysis, with its focus on the functions of language in action. As this year's synthesis question leader observed, this third possibility suggests that "a clearer distinction needs to be made between AP English Literature courses and AP English Language courses so that the equally legitimate but differing goals of each, and their respective exams, receive appropriate emphasis."

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?

Like the synthesis prompt, the analysis prompt tests students' reading skills as much as their writing skills. Rhetorical reading requires students to ask, first and foremost, what the text is intending to *do* — i.e., to warn, to admonish, to encourage, to dissuade, to persuade, to scold, to call to account, to inspire, etc.

- **Exercises and assignments that ask students to think of language as an active force will strengthen their ability to read rhetorically.**
- **Encourage students to use descriptive verbs to identify the social functions of written and spoken language.** For example, when introducing quoted language, students should learn to replace popular, nondescript verbs like "says" or "states" (or the popular and inaccurate "quotes") with verbs that explain what the original speaker or writer was attempting to do with the quoted language. Students can build their ability to quote sources both accurately and critically through simple exercises like *listing* verbs that describe things language can do, and then putting those verbs into simple intransitive (S-V) and then transitive (S-TV-O) sentences.
- **Practice in writing rhetorical analysis can also be practice in arguing and in quoting sources.** The rhetorical analysis task requires students to make claims about a text, supporting those claims with textual evidence. In learning to analyze texts, students can also be learning to select, introduce, quote, comment upon, or otherwise use language from a source.
- **Eventually, Graff and Birkenstein's advice in *They Say, I Say* about reporting what "they say" in academic conversations can point to other helpful interventions.** While Graff and Birkenstein's template pedagogy should not be used as an ultimate or absolute set of formulae for students to use in academic writing, the conversation model presented in *They Say, I Say* is grounded in an active view of language — as interactional "moves" people make in written as well as spoken language.
- **Teachers can practice rhetorical reading in responding to student writing and speaking.** To give rhetorical responses, we need to rhetorically analyze student writing, making an effort to discern *who* is saying *what* to *whom* and to *what end*? If we approach students' language performances with these questions in mind, we may better understand how students' intentions do or don't accord with the purposes of academic conversation. This understanding will help us explain to students how the moves they make with language help and hinder them in academic conversations.

Question 3

What was the intent of this question?

Question 3, the argument question, begins by recounting a research claim that the “creativity quotient” of American young people, particularly those in kindergarten through sixth grade, has declined. Students were asked to consider this claim in the context of looming, unprecedented global crises that require creative responses (e.g., pollution in the Gulf of Mexico and the war in Afghanistan). Finally, students were asked to consider whether one particular attempt to solve the creativity crisis — adding a separate class in creativity — was a viable solution for their own schools to implement. In an effort to help students focus and address their arguments to an audience with the capacity to take action, the prompt asked students to address their arguments to their school boards. Because specifying an audience was intended to help students respond successfully to the prompt, not to give them a way to fail, students were not penalized for not writing in the form of a letter or for not explicitly addressing their arguments to their school boards. While some students had a clear understanding of who makes up their school boards and how the school board functions, others did not. So while some students may have been rewarded in the scoring for skillfully employing a rhetorical strategy such as appealing to shared values such as quality education, community involvement, and finding solutions to global problems, students were not penalized for using other argument strategies.

The question was intended to give students an opportunity to demonstrate their abilities to produce sound and convincing arguments in support of clearly articulated positions. Unlike some argument questions from previous years, this year’s prompt gave students an either/or choice — to argue for or against establishing a creativity class in their school’s curriculum. Unlike some previous years’ argument prompts that required students to build arguments about abstract concepts (e.g., last year’s argument prompt about the relationships between ownership and sense of self), this year’s prompt explicitly directed students to supply their own definitions of “creativity.” This explicit direction was intended to underscore the importance in argumentation of defining terms that might otherwise be differently interpreted by audience members.

How well did students perform on this question?

The mean score on this year’s argument question was 4.59 on a 9-point scale. This was .83 points higher than the mean for the analysis question and .06 points lower than the mean for the synthesis question.

What were common student errors or omissions?

Most students who responded to the argument prompt responded to both parts of the question by defining creativity and taking a position as to whether or not their own schools should offer a course in creativity. This year’s argument question leader observed that while some students provided definitions as a first step in the essay, a more popular choice was the implicit definition of creativity embedded throughout the essay. Writers variously defined creativity in terms of innovation, imagination, advanced problem solving, critical thinking and self-expression. The cliché “thinking outside the box” appeared in countless definitions, as did references to high-tech products and their innovators (Steve Jobs, Bill Gates, Mark Zuckerberg, and Albert Einstein frequently appeared as examples of creative thinkers who resisted the constraints of formal education). In addition to the use of celebrity examples, the most commonly occurring form of evidence and explanation in definitions of creativity and arguments for or against a creativity class was personal anecdote. As the question leader observed of this argumentative strategy, it was most successful in essays that ignored the context of political and environmental problems introduced in the prompt, focusing instead on whether or how the students’ own schools might address or contribute to the alleged creativity crisis among U.S. school children.

The arguments also covered a range of positions: instruction in creativity should be interwoven throughout the curriculum, the school should emphasize arts education, special classes should be designed to teaching creative thinking skills, schools should abandon curricular structure altogether, and schooling is

antithetical to the development of creative thinking skills.

Essays scored as 4 (inadequate) or below (unsuccessful) generally faltered in one or more of the following ways:

- They asserted a position without providing a supporting argument in the form of convincing evidence and a clear line of reasoning.
- They offered evidence that was inaptly selected (e.g., a personal anecdote was used to illustrate an educational solution to urgent global problems).
- They offered evidence that was insufficiently developed (e.g., a glancing reference to teaching-to-the-test pedagogy without an account of how students experience this pedagogy or how it affects their powers of creativity).
- They failed to establish a clear, reasoned connection between the evidence they presented and the position they asserted.

A few very successful essays were occasionally grounded in a skeptical reading of the rhetoric of crisis in the prompt. These essays noted that the alarming news about a steadily declining “creativity quotient” took the form of a secondhand report of research whose methodologies were not disclosed and whose alleged implications — political, economic and environmental — were not explained. The argument question leader reports that most writers regarded the material in the prompt as “mere reportage,” devoting themselves directly to the task of taking a stand on how to solve the crisis rather than stopping to question whether it was real.

Another way in which argument essays achieved scores in the upper half of the 9-point scale was to deploy an aptly selected, extended example. For instance, one successful essay presented a detailed account of how the young mathematician, Carl Friedrich Gauss, exemplified the antipathy between creativity and formal schooling and used this example to support the argument that because creativity is ultimately unteachable, a creativity course in school would be a waste of money and time. Another successful essay detailed how formulaic, test-driven pedagogy in the student’s high school classes exposes the need for school reform that gives both teachers and students more opportunity to experiment and even fail. Yet another successful example modeled a creative approach to the prompt by giving a detailed account of the deadening schooling experience of “a student not unlike myself” in an educational system increasingly controlled by psychometrics. Although these essays represent different approaches, one using a historic example, one using personal narrative, and the other using a fictionalized narrative as evidence, all three succeeded because of the fullness with which they developed their evidence and explanations and because of the steady focus of their reasoning. The Question Leader Report offers the following explanation of the role played by reasoning in successful argument essays:

Reasoning might include the following: considering or demonstrating the relevance or aptness of evidence in relation to a claim; being able to qualify a generalization; articulating a series of concessions and weighing the relative merits of each. A line of reasoning entails establishing a methodical, or step-by-step, approach to laying out the expression, organization, or sequence of ideas. Important hallmarks of reasoning would include being able to deploy well the logical relationships of cause/effect and contrast, among others.

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?

In developing their skills of argumentation in academic contexts, students must understand that skepticism is a defining characteristic of the academic community. They must learn to recognize the standards of evidence and explanation required by audience members who do not automatically accept every assertion they read or hear. Understanding academic skepticism will help students make distinctions between simple assertions of opinion or belief and clearly reasoned positions. In language and composition classes, as in their math classes, students must be able to “show their thinking.” Teachers

can help students meet this challenge by reading and responding to student language as an audience member who is both interested in and skeptical of the claims students are making. It's a good idea for us to explain this reading stance to students in advance. A skeptic is not the same as a naysayer who universally rejects what anyone else has to say; a skeptic can be convinced by appropriate evidence, well-targeted appeals to values and emotions, and solid logic. In responding to student language on assignments and class discussions, teachers can communicate their skeptical reception of students' arguments, for instance, by asking students to clarify their logic or by challenging the appropriateness of their evidence. In providing this kind of response, we can rely heavily on questions: How do you know this is true? How does this fit with the claim you make in the second paragraph? What do you mean when you say this class taught "creativity"?

By modeling the role of the skeptical reader, we demonstrate a reader's stance that students need to adopt themselves, whether in workshopping the language of their peers, revising their own language productions, or encountering texts in their college classes and their everyday lives.

Finally, students should frequently encounter argumentative texts in their assigned reading for the course. In reading investigative journalism, political advocacy, cultural critiques and other argument genres, students should practice identifying and critiquing such features of argument as assertions, authority, evidence, rationale, and appeals to emotions and values. While students must learn to recognize both successful and unsuccessful argumentative strategies, it is often counterproductive for them to begin this process by memorizing lists of logical fallacies (which they sometimes confuse with rhetorical strategies, as evidenced by some responses to the analysis prompt).