



Student Performance Q&A:

2015 AP[®] English Language & Composition Free-Response Questions

The following comments on the 2015 free-response questions for AP[®] English Language and Composition were written by the Chief Reader, Mary Trachsel of the University of 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?

As its label “Synthesis” suggests, Question 1 was intended to test students’ abilities to combine and coordinate several academic literacy skills in concert. These skills in reading, writing and thinking may be categorized as follows: 1) comprehension of the prompt; 2) comprehension and critique of individual verbal and visual texts; 3) synthetic or “holistic” comprehension of a multiperspectival inquiry — the “academic conversation” represented by the sources collectively; 4) academic argumentation, the student’s own entry into the conversation; 5) acknowledgement and explanation of other sources’ contributions to the students’ argument.

This year’s prompt directed students to apply their reading of the sources to their own lives, developing independent arguments on whether and/or how their own schools should “establish, maintain, reconsider, or eliminate” an honor code. The prompt defined honor codes as “sets of rules or principles that are intended to cultivate integrity” and that “often take the form of written positions on practices like cheating, stealing, and plagiarizing as well as on the consequences of violating the established codes.” The prompt also directed students to synthesize a minimum of three of the six sources and to clearly identify the sources they decide to use, offering two citation style options — author’s names or letters A-F. The prompt specified that citations are needed regardless of the form in which the sources’ contributions are presented — as quotations, paraphrases, or summaries. Students were cautioned not to confuse the argument task of this question with a demand for “mere summary,” i.e., mere comprehension of the sources without critical analysis of their arguments and critical consideration of their multiple perspectives. Instead, they were to “use” the sources in constructing their own independent arguments. By asking students to focus their responses on their own schools, this year’s synthesis prompt invited students to bring first-person experiences and observations into conversation with the sources.

How well did students do on this question?

The mean score was 4.73 out of a possible 9 points.

As readers discovered in June, the topic of honor codes was familiar to some writers and unfamiliar to others. Students with no direct experience of honor codes had to use the verbal explanation contained in the prompt. Students from schools with honor codes or students with some other prior experience of an honor code were able to interpret the verbal explanation in light of this prior knowledge, a condition that may have eased their reading and boosted their confidence in writing. Moreover, as one reader pointed out, the topic of honor codes in and of itself may confer a class advantage to some students. All the schools mentioned in the source materials were old and prestigious institutions from the east coast of the U.S., where honor codes may be deeply embedded in the culture.

Whatever comprehension advantage prior exposure to honor codes may have bestowed on some students, prior knowledge did not necessarily equate with high scoring essays, nor did lack of exposure equate with low scoring essays. Students with no direct experience of honor codes often referenced their general knowledge of honesty and dishonesty. Some high scoring essays demonstrated the ability to leverage this general knowledge in considering whether an honor code as described in the prompt might affect honest and dishonest academic behavior at their schools.

The best essays we read were those that demonstrated strong and confident *synthetic reading* as well as *synthetic writing skills*. The synthesis question poses a “holistic” reading task that entails digesting all (or at least 3) of the source texts and finding among them a coherent **argument** of the student’s own making. When we read their essays in June, we looked for evidence that students could see the source texts in conversation with one another, addressing the same or related questions — this year, questions about school honor codes. (Do they work? If so, how? If not, why not? Do they encourage sound ethical principles, or do they make a mockery of honor? Does responsibility for maintaining student honesty rest in the hands of school authorities or in the hands of students themselves? How should authorities or students carry out these responsibilities?)

The best essays also demonstrated *responsive reading*. Not only could students discern a conversation among the source texts, they could also enter that conversation themselves. This kind of reading entails acknowledging others’ answers to one or more of the questions raised in the conversation and weighing in on the question from one’s own considered perspective.

High scoring essays demonstrated that their writers read the source texts synthetically, for the overarching conversation rather than for discreet bits of information contained in any one source. Because they had abstracted the gist of the argument in the source text, they were likely to rely primarily on summary and paraphrase when they referred to source texts, saving direct quotation for appropriate points in their argument (e.g., when the writer was responding to the language in which a source presented its point).

The writing task of Question #1 is developing an argument. High scoring essays demonstrated developmental strategies that went beyond repetition of claims (whether the sources’ or the student’s own) or repetition of the same type of evidence in support of a single claim (e.g., Honor codes are ineffective because 1) quotation from source; 2) quotation from another source; 3) quotation from another source). The adept writers of the most successful essays constructed chains of logic that wove together not just information but perspectives presented in the sources with the writer’s own reasoned point of view. They read the sources rhetorically, for instance, finding significance in the fact that one source presented the perspective of a student government representative, that another was a cynical British cartoon, and that schools subscribing to honor codes were among the schools reporting cheating scandals.

The scoring guide defines synthesis as the *use of sources* to develop an argument. In the most successful essays, students used the sources in a variety of ways, all with an eye toward developing their own

arguments in response to the question about the advisability of honor codes. They might, for example, use a source to raise a question or provoke an observation of their own; they might note contradictions and agreements among sources and speculate on the reasons behind them; they might use multiple sources to create a narrative they can respond to (e.g., honor codes established, times change, and new ways of teaching honesty and of being dishonest arise, old honor codes and methods fall away, new methods of instilling and reinforcing honesty have to be developed).

What were common student errors or omissions?

Students who overlooked or had difficulty comprehending the explanation of honor codes in the prompt almost invariably produced low-scoring essays, not simply because they presented an obscure or confused understanding of honor codes but more importantly because they demonstrated difficulty in comprehending the source materials as well — both individually and collectively.

Essays scoring in the midrange tended to demonstrate either synthetic or responsive reading but did not coordinate the two — or they performed a rather simplistic form of the two reading modes. These student writers generally understood their writing task as presenting an argument. In making this argument, however, they tended to consult their own existing beliefs and then selectively draw support for those beliefs from the sources, or they would consult the sources and reproduce those arguments rather than formulating their own. This latter category of students essentially let the sources speak for them rather than *using* the sources (wording in the scoring guide’s definition of synthesis) to help them articulate their own points of view. In the words of the scoring guide, these kinds of essays demonstrated “strained” (mid-range) or “weak” (lower-range) connections between the student’s argument and the sources.

Low-scoring essays tended to rely heavily on the language of the source texts rather than the gist of their arguments. In other words, instead of *using* the source texts, writers of low scoring responses to Question #1 tended to *quote* them. Heavy reliance on the words of others gives student writers little opportunity to develop their own arguments. Often, in essays of this type, the students’ own words were limited primarily to summarizing the meaning of the quoted passages.

Unlike most high scoring essay writers, who read the sources holistically as well as analytically, student writers whose essays received low- to mid-range scores tended to equate the *use* of sources with simply *quoting* or paraphrasing the sources and *citing* them. Low-scoring essays tended to quote and cite without apparent purpose while essays earning mid-range scores tended to *use* sources in only one way — as unquestioned (factual) support for the writer’s arguments about honor codes.

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?

Spend time on reading. This is a course that requires students to develop reading as well as writing skills. As the synthesis question demonstrates, students need to be able to comprehend and interpret various types of nonfiction texts and to read across texts. Students need to read for arguments. The first questions they should ask when they encounter a text are “Who is this writer? What does he or she want to accomplish with this text? What point is the writer making?” Students also need to practice comparing arguments they find in different texts, in effect, putting texts into conversation with one another.

In reading and synthesizing texts, students need to understand that they are working with ideas and perspectives, not just words and sentences. They need to practice paraphrasing and synthesizing, and they must learn to avoid excessive reliance on quotation, using direct quotation only when it is important to retain the original wording, for instance, because it reveals something about the author’s position or attitude.

Finally, students need to learn that they can use texts in a variety of ways — texts may provoke them, raise questions for them, challenge them, offer alternative points of view, etc. Students need to know that the uses of source texts exceed mere support to back up students’ claims.

Question 2

What was the intent of this question?

The “Analysis” prompt was intended to test students’ abilities to articulate their understanding of a short, argumentative text as an intentional “speech act” — that is, not merely as words on the page but as words in action, words intended to have a social impact. This year’s text was an excerpt from a magazine article by Cesar Chavez detailing how nonviolence works not simply as a strategy but as a moral principle of the farm workers’ movement. The prompt supplied contextual information about the occasion of the article (the 10th anniversary of the assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr.), the identity of the author (Cesar Chavez, a labor union organizer and civil rights leader), and the publication venue (the magazine of a religious organization devoted to helping the poor). From this information, students had to infer the original audience and something of the rhetorical purpose of Chavez’s “argument about nonviolent resistance.” From their reading of the text, students had to understand the particularities and the overarching point of Chavez’s argument, discern its logic and appeals, and further infer the intentionality behind it. This year’s analysis question directed students’ attention not to “rhetorical devices” or even “rhetorical strategies” but to “rhetorical choices” made by Chavez. This terminology was selected to emphasize the primacy of authorial agency and communicative purpose over the implementation of formal tropes in the text.

How well did students perform on this question?

The mean score was 4.04 out of a possible 9 points.

The mean score this year represents an improvement over last year’s mean score of 3.76 out of a possible 9 points. Roger Cherry, this year’s question leader for Q2, attributes this improvement in part to the passage in this year’s question. The article commemorated the 10th anniversary of Martin Luther King’s assassination and used the occasion to endorse and explain the importance of non-violence to the farm laborers’ campaign for economic justice. Students generally understood Chavez’s argument and the intent behind it. Some brought historical knowledge to their reading of the passage and used this knowledge to enrich their understanding of the context in which the text was originally published. Many students were able to draw connections between social justice advocacy today and that of the 1970s when Chavez wrote the article. Moreover, Chavez’s article was stylistically rich, so that even those students whose analysis training was primarily literary were able to identify how Chavez used language purposefully.

The best essays demonstrated holistic as well as analytic reading of the text. That is, high-scoring writers had a solid understanding of Chavez’s intention, the gist of his argument, and the constraints and opportunities afforded by the occasion. When they made claims about particular “strategies” gleaned from the text, they made them within the context of this broader rhetorical understanding of what Chavez was trying to accomplish — the “work” he wanted his text to do in the world. Many of these writers were able to use their knowledge of U.S. history to sharpen this rhetorical understanding.

High-scoring essays offered coherent and purposeful development. They produced analyses not simply to demonstrate analysis but to make a point about how Chavez used the text to perform a rhetorical act of some complexity (e.g., to offer encouragement to those who might be disheartened by the slow pace of social progress obtained through non-violent means). Instead of merely offering one or more pieces of textual evidence to support an analytic claim, they produced an argument that Chavez had made his rhetorical choices with a rhetorical purpose in sight and that these choices worked together (synthetically, holistically) in that service.

Some low-scoring essays produced strictly stylistic analyses, focused on formal features of the text and offering little explanation of how these features served an overarching rhetorical purpose within a rhetorical and historical situation — either the one occasioned by Chavez’s composition of the text or the one occasioned by their own reading of the text. Stronger essays analyzed the text in either of these situations or developed a connection between Chavez’s intentions in composing the text and the impact the text had upon them when they encountered it several decades later. The strongest essays using this developmental strategy clearly distinguished between the historical moments of composition and reading and between themselves and Chavez’s original audience.

What were common student errors or omissions?

Low- to mid-scoring essays demonstrated an absent, insecure, or confused holistic reading of the text. The writers of these essays failed to identify Chavez’s argument at all or identified it in simplistic terms. Some low-scoring essays demonstrated a misreading of Chavez’s message and/or of the prompt. Mid-scoring essays tended to offer fairly uncomplicated versions of Chavez’s argument while making much of word- and sentence-level features of his text. These essays might quote extensively to illustrate the presence of a stylistic feature (e.g., repetition, pronoun choice, metaphor) but have very little to say about how this stylistic feature helped or hindered Chavez’s efforts to accomplish his purpose. Often the writers of these essays limited their articulation of purpose to the obvious (to illustrate what he means, to show that he knows what he’s talking about, to emphasize that he means what he says, to get the readers to agree with him, to make sure his audience understands him).

While low-scoring essays were sometimes disorganized, composed of paragraphs making separate and unrelated points about Chavez’s article, mid-range essays often made use of formulaic organizational strategies — most prominently the five-paragraph theme. While this organizational framework did help, many writers perform a rudimentary rhetorical analysis, the essays it produced tended to be static. That is, they made a (usually three-fold) claim about Chavez’s rhetorical choices, provided textual evidence that he did indeed make these choices, and concluded with a repetition of the claim that he had made these choices to achieve a fairly generic goal — to convince readers that nonviolent protest is better than violent protest — or to make sure readers understood his point.

Formulaic essays were especially prominent in students’ responses to Q2, the question that generated most if not all of the few essays flagged as potential security breaches, because multiple essays contained identical paragraph openers. The students who wrote these papers had obviously been taught to use a formula — to treat every text as the same and to treat rhetorical analysis as nothing more than a testing activity.

Some students offered no response at all to the prompt. Blanks and zeroes were far more frequent scores on Q2 than on either of the other essay questions, and while statisticians tell us the effects of these non-responses were not significant, they do seem to indicate that despite the improved performance on Q2 this year, students continue to find rhetorical analysis a bewildering and daunting task.

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?

The primary challenge for high school and college teachers is to convince students that rhetorical analysis is a useful, critical reading skill — a skill they use every day, though they may not be aware they are using it. Rhetorical analysis means sizing up a situation, reading the intentions behind the messages we receive, reading the character of the speakers and writers we encounter, and considering whose interests are served by the propositions they are asking us to accept. One way to reinforce this understanding of rhetorical analysis is to introduce it with short, everyday texts: advertisements, political campaign speeches, public service announcements, letters to the editor, solicitation letters from non-profits, postings on the internet. After learning to identify the argument and to read intent and purpose in the features of these texts, students

need to practice these same skills on longer, more complicated texts, ideally extending to book-length texts that present sustained, complicated arguments — the kind of texts students can expect to be assigned in their college classes.

Students need help understanding how rhetorical analysis differs from literary analysis. Literature is an art form, a verbal construction that is somehow timeless because it examines eternal truths and universal situations. Rhetoric is a pragmatic enterprise; it isn't concerned with timeless artifacts but with timely interventions. Students should learn that rhetorical analysis involves a speaker's or writer's intentions or rhetorical purposes, and particular audiences — whether the original audience addressed, like the readers of the magazine in which Chavez published his article in the 1970s, or a subsequent, unintended audience, like the students who read Chavez's argument for the first time on the AP Exam in 2015. They need to consider the overarching question, What work is this text supposed to be doing? What does the speaker or writer want to accomplish by getting one or more people to listen or read?

This year's analysis question underscores the importance of reading texts as transactions between writers and particular readers rather than between writers and a generic construct, "the reader." Students need to realize that Chavez's original audience of his contemporaries at a particular historical moment likely understood and responded to his message in ways very different from their own. They need to consider how an author's intentions may or may not match the reader's responses to the text. For instance, while they might infer Chavez's purpose, they cannot say with certainty how his readers responded to it unless they can draw on prior historical knowledge. They can, however, write with authority on their own reader's response to the text. Rhetorical analysis, in other words, is an analysis embedded in a social context.

Question 3

What was the intent of this question?

The "Argument Question" was intended to elicit a demonstration of students' skills in critical thinking and rhetorical crafting of written argumentation. This year's prompt featured an observation, from an anthropological study of first-year students at an American university, that common, friendly phrases such as "How are you?", "Nice to meet you," and "Let's get in touch" convey politeness rather than literal meaning. Students were asked to articulate their own positions on the "value or function" of polite speech in a community with which they were personally familiar, and to support their assertions with evidence or reasoning drawn from their reading, experience, or observation. Like the Synthesis Question, Question 3, in directing students to consider polite speech in a community familiar to them, asked students to apply the prompt to their own real world experiences. In offering students the option of arguing about either the function or the value of polite speech, the prompt encouraged students to shape their arguments as rhetorical analysis (What work do these phrases do in the world, and how so?) or evaluation (What is the worth of these phrases, and how so?). In asking students to consider three potential sources of support, the argument prompt encouraged students to employ synthetic thinking skills.

How well did students perform on this question?

The mean score was 4.06 out of a possible 9 points.

Successful essays tended to present an interpretation of culture and community while developing a position on the function or value of polite speech within that social context. The writers of these essays were able to develop a focused argument that synthesized experiences and observations in support of a principal claim. In the words of this year's Q3 Question Leader, Mona Choucair, they were able to assume a critical distance from which to view the human behavior the prompt defined as "polite speech," and they were able to go beyond the obvious and predictable claim that polite speech makes people feel good or that it is insincere. Successful essays tended to introduce new examples of polite speech, drawn from their own life experiences

and observations or, in some cases, their readers. While this year’s Argument Question didn’t elicit as many literary examples as Argument Questions in some past years have done, those students who successfully employed literary examples were able to thoughtfully and persuasively draw relevant examples from their reading of literary texts.

What were common student errors or omissions?

Less successful papers tended to limit their consideration of polite speech to the three examples provided in the prompt and did not reflect on particular ways forms of polite speech function in their own communities. Often their claims about polite speech were supported by hypothetical examples — often examples of job interviews in which polite speech enables an applicant to secure a job while failure to use polite speech results in unemployment. The basic organizational pattern of the five paragraph theme often appeared in essays scored in the low and middle ranges of the scale. As in formulaic responses to the analysis question, these essays tended to substitute repetition for conceptual development of their points; that is, they would offer (usually) three examples of the use of polite speech in support of a single claim about its value or function, and these examples appeared in no particular order, and the conclusion was often a mere repetition rather than a development of the opening claim. Low-scoring essays also tended to dismiss the concept of “community” and presented their arguments about polite speech without a social context. Sometimes the arguments in low-scoring essays were self-contradicting, or the writer didn’t develop an argument at all but merely listed examples of polite speech drawn from the prompt and/or the writer’s experience and observations. Yet another way in which essays failed to earn higher-end scores was in substituting a different task for the one specified in the task. Instead of developing an argument about how polite speech functions in a community they know well, these essays delivered a sermon, using imperatives to advise the reader to use polite speech and prescribing ways to do this. Finally, relatively unsuccessful essays often consisted of assertions with little or no support; they answered the question but did not produce an 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?

In learning to develop academically sound arguments, students need to assume their audience is skeptical and has to be convinced. When students make assertions, they must imagine a skeptical reader asking, “How do you know that?” “Why should I believe you?” and “What do you mean?” Teachers can help students internalize a skeptical academic audience by assuming this stance when they respond to student writing and speaking. Because students may feel threatened when their positions are challenged, teachers should let them know they should expect challenging responses because this is a norm of academic discourse — not necessarily because the teacher disagrees or wants to silence students, but because defending or justifying a position is expected in academic contexts.

Teachers can also help students identify what counts as “appropriate evidence” and reasoning. Hypothetical and obviously fabricated evidence (“Let’s suppose a high school student interviews for a job at a hospital...” or “85% of students who took part in a survey at the University of Texas said that a polite greeting from a faculty member in the hallway increased their happiness...”) is generally inappropriate support for a serious claim because it calls the writer’s credibility into question and highlights the lack of empirical evidence.