



Student Performance Q&A:

2016 AP[®] English Language and Composition Free-Response Questions

The following comments on the 2016 free-response questions for AP[®] English Language and Composition were written by the Chief Reader, Elizabethada Wright of the University of Minnesota Duluth. 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 in years past, the 2016 “Synthesis Question” asked students to integrate supplied sources into their arguments regarding whether monolingual English speakers are at a disadvantage in the world today. The skills necessary to do well on this question include not only the ability to persuade an audience to the students’ positions, but also to read, analyze, and integrate the supplied sources into the students’ arguments. As observed in last year’s Student Performance Q&A report, the skills necessary to do well with the question can be categorized as “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 began by acknowledging the global spread of the English language in various fields and disciplines that has occurred simultaneously with a decrease in the study of foreign languages in English-speaking countries. Instead of asking students why foreign language study might be valuable, the prompt took a different perspective, asking “whether monolingual English speakers are at a disadvantage today.” With the direction that the student’s “argument should be the focus of [the] essay,” the prompt made clear that students should not “merely summarize[e] the sources.” In fact, while Question 3 is termed the “Argument Question,” Question 1 is no less an argument question: the difference is that Question 1 provides sources that the students must synthesize into their support. Therefore, students must quote, paraphrase, or summarize the sources, but each of these should be used in service of providing support for the students’ arguments, or (as the prompt states) the sources should be used “to develop [the] argument and explain the reasoning for it.” With this direction, the prompt did not preclude the students’ use of support from their own experiences or knowledge, nor did the prompt encourage students to accept all the given sources as acceptable. In fact, the provided sources disagree and contradict one another; therefore, excelling students evaluated the quality of the sources as well as the logic used within them.

How well did students perform on this question?

The adjusted mean score was 4.51 out of a possible 9 points. Most students and teachers felt this year's question was on a topic easily accessible to students. However, the mean score is lower than last year's mean.

Part of the reason students felt so comfortable with this year's Question 1 is that students are familiar with the presence of multiple languages around them, as they are similarly familiar with the United States' dominant multilingualism. Adding to the students' collective comfort level was the fact that both multilingual and monolingual students appear to have felt comfortable with the issue of monolingualism. With students feeling so familiar with this year's topic, and with the compelling sources, many students wrote lengthy arguments. However, it is important to note that this high student comfort level did not necessarily translate into many stronger essays.

Most students argued that monolingualism disadvantaged English speakers, though many of the strongest essays argued that monolingualism did NOT disadvantage English speakers. Just as the choice of response had no influence on the students' scores, the length of the essays had little influence. What did affect the scores was the quality of the students' arguments: how well the essays provided clearly and fully articulated support for their claims.

As in years past, long weaker essays tended to quote, summarize, or paraphrase many of the sources without using the sources as support for claims. These long weaker essays repeated much of the information from the sources, with the student adding that she or he agreed or disagreed with the source, sometimes offering a one-sentence reason for the agreement or disagreement. While some weak essays catalogued the sources, other weak essays offered assertion and examples that offered limited illustration of why the assertion was valid. Many weak essays made assertions and used the sources as support; however, often the cited material countered the claims the students made. Weak essays also tended to assume the reader agreed with them. For example, many weaker essays used many rhetorical questions, assuming the reader will answer the question a particular way. Others assumed the reader's familiarity with the examples given and did not interpret the examples to illustrate how they work to support the essay's claim.

The strongest essays illustrated a clear understanding of the sources derived from the students' careful readings of the sources. Understanding one or two lines of a passage is very different from understanding the whole of the passage's argument. Students tended to score higher when they understood this whole and could cite specifics to illustrate this understanding in service of their arguments. Students who did well also recognized that the sources were in conversation with each other, agreeing and disagreeing on points. Therefore, students do not have to accept all the sources as fact; instead, they can counter arguments made by sources with their own argument. Additionally, some stronger essays recognized that the sources have differing levels of credibility and used that information to illustrate why one piece of evidence might have more bias or lower quality "facts" than another. In other words, the best essays don't just observe and comment on points made by the sources; instead, they interpret the ways in which these sources' points interact and then draw their own conclusions.

Within the strongest essays' conversation with the sources, student writers added support from their own knowledge to elaborate on how a source worked in concert with the students' claim. Many of the best essays included details about the students' own linguistic experiences, whether those were in multilingual homes or in challenging high school language classrooms. These student writers did not assume the reader interpreted what they interpreted in the source; instead, they elaborated on the reasoning that connected the source with the claim.

As in years past, this question is asking students to create an argument. The only difference between the argument in Question 1 and that in Question 3 is that Question 1 provides sources that students must utilize in service of that argument. Therefore, the strongest essays were written with an awareness of the reader

and the readers' knowledge. They did not assume understandings or agreements, and instead explained how sources worked to support. They also were aware of what kinds of evidence would be acceptable to and sufficient for their audience. In other words, they anticipated the audience's potential confusion or disagreement about a source or claim, and they elaborated on why the audience should accept the source or claim. In other words, the writers of the strongest essays carefully considered their own rhetorical situations.

What were common student errors or omissions?

Students often did not read and/or think about the sources carefully enough. Students tended to summarize, quote, or paraphrase the sources without really thinking about how to use the sources in service of their argument. They seemed to assume that quoting one or two lines from a source shows sufficient familiarity with the source. When writing the essay for Question 1, students instead need to first understand what the author of the passage is arguing and how the author supports her or his argument. Students then need to think how this author's argument will fit within the student's own argument.

Students also need to be more selective regarding what they quote, paraphrase, or summarize. Direct quotation is not always needed and should be used only when necessary (e.g., the wording reveals something about the author's position or attitude). Not every paragraph of a source needs to be summarized; students need to realize that only that which is relevant to their arguments needs to be included.

Another common error was that many students assumed all sources are equally valid. They need to realize that some sources are more credible than others. For example, when a blog writer cites statistics, that writer has no one checking the statistics' credibility whereas a piece of journalism or an academic article has layers of checking.

Students also seemed to rush into writing without thinking about what organization will work best for their argument. Too often the five-paragraph essay structure was the default structure. While that sometimes works, other times it weakens the argument. Similarly, sensational openings to essays can work in some instances, but not all. Students need to consider what will work for their situation before beginning to write. Students should use the time given to think and organize.

Probably the largest omission is that tendency of students not to think about their audiences. They forget that they are in a rhetorical situation and need to address both their audience and the exigence of their situation.

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?

One lesson from this year's source packet is that the test won't shy away from lengthy passages or data-filled charts. The sources were rich and accessible but required sustained attention from students. Students, therefore, need to know how to read and comprehend lengthy sources. They need to practice reading and understanding the complex ideas that the words are expressing.

Additionally, teachers need to have students think about their audiences much more. What works to persuade one audience will not necessarily persuade another. Therefore, the students who assume their audience has the same values as a 16- or 17-year-old has not thought enough about what will convince their audience. Within lessons about audience, teachers can help students think more about the rhetorical nature of the support students use in their essays: is the support acceptable to the audience? Is it relevant to the issue? Will the audience find the support sufficient, or is there need for further elaboration or example?

Teachers can also teach students how to engage with and evaluate sources. Not all sources are equal. When "facts" are reported, sometimes those facts have been well vetted; sometimes they are close to fictional. Have students think more about what makes a source reliable.

Question 2

What was the intent of this question?

This year's "Rhetorical Analysis Question" asked students to evaluate the rhetorical strategies used in a piece of epideictic rhetoric, specifically a eulogy to Ronald Reagan given by Margaret Thatcher. As in past years, this year's task asked students to consider the rhetorical situation a speaker faces and to examine the choices the rhetor makes to move his or her audience to respond in a way that the rhetor desires. This task is very different from that required in analyses of literary texts: a rhetorical text is created to prompt a specific and timely action or reaction.

For students who may not have known who either Margaret Thatcher or Ronald Reagan was, the prompt supplied the information about their leadership positions ("the former prime minister of Great Britain" and "former United States president" respectively), as well as specifics regarding the date ("June 11, 2004") and audience of the address ("the American people"). Though the prompt did not tell students that this text was a speech of praise, students could quickly recognize the laudatory nature of Thatcher's work.

While the prompt did ask students to "analyze the rhetorical strategies that Thatcher uses to convey her message," this direction did not ask for them to discuss solely or primarily elements of style. To understand the strategies used by a rhetor, a student must first consider the rhetor's relationship to the audience, as well as how this relationship requires both what this specific rhetor should include — or exclude — in the speech for this specific audience. Additionally, a student must consider how the rhetor arranges the speech for the particular audience in the specific circumstances of the speech. While elements of style are certainly fodder to consider, they are not the first ingredient rhetors focus on when developing strategies to persuade audiences: style is the third canon of rhetoric, not the first or even second.

How well did students perform on this question?

The adjusted mean score was 4.38 out of a possible 9 points, higher than last year's mean of 4.04. This is the second consecutive year that students have improved the mean on this question.

Part of the reason for this improvement was students' comfort level with Thatcher's eulogy. It comprised a rich collection of rhetorical approaches that were highly accessible. Almost every student understood the rhetorical situation Thatcher faced, though some recognized more complexity of the situation than others. Students generally understood Thatcher's desire to praise Reagan and her use of anecdotes to illustrate, not only Reagan's strength as a world leader, but also his importance as a human being.

With this comfort level, some students did not necessarily read Thatcher's speech as closely as they should have. For example, lower performing essays overdramatized Thatcher's emotion, inferring that all eulogies reflect devastation. They also overstated the depth of Thatcher's feelings for/relationship with Reagan on a continuum from "Besties" to "Unrequited Lovers." Additionally, there were occasional misreadings of individual moments in the text; for example, the assassination attempt led some to sympathize with what they deduced was Reagan's suicidal tendencies.

Weaker essays tended to use what the Question Leader called the "Appeals Trilogy." For example, some students followed a formula analyzing diction, syntax, and tone. Instead of looking at specific choices that Thatcher made, students tried to fit the passage to those parameters, or students followed a very similar formula analyzing the artistic proofs (pathos, logos, and ethos) with an unbounded dedication, considering each as a discrete entity, not recognizing how words in a text can work to shape all three of these artistic proofs simultaneously. Although repetition, syntax, and parallelism frequently were cited, many writers could not tangibly explain how each revealed Thatcher's purpose. Instead, lower performing essays argued that these features "emphasized her point," "made the eulogy more relatable," or so forth. Further, rather than

talking about how repetition and antithesis worked together in cited passages, students treated each separately, seemingly not aware that they overlapped.

Overall, however, student performance has improved on this question. Most students delved into the analysis with convincing insight, and essays that examined how Thatcher intentionally structured her eulogy tended to be stronger than those that were trope driven. Students readily recognized the rhetorical situation for what it was. Those who dug deep offered a more compelling organization. Some organized their discussion around Thatcher's claim that Reagan's ideas are "clear" yet "never simplistic," revealing how Thatcher asserted a claim about Reagan's character that initially appeared mundane but then revealed it to be a more complex asset. Others examined how she demonstrated her parallel claims that Reagan was a "great" president, American, and man, revealing each to be an intentional feature of her tribute. Higher scoring essays addressed Thatcher's appeals to quintessential American values like nationalism, patriotism as opposed to using generic explanations about such ideas as ethos, etc. Addressing specific values showed a clear and convincing understanding of the rhetorical situation. Most pedestrian essays organized around the appeals and/or tropes were more descriptive than analytical. For example, the students might state something like "Thatcher said this which means that" and on to the next point. They employed circular logic. Many students not only confused ethos with ethics, they also argued that Thatcher used ethos to establish Reagan's rather than Thatcher's credibility. Likewise, they discussed pathos in terms of Thatcher's rather than the audience's sensibilities. Sometimes they struggled to identify the features that signaled each appeal. In all cases, too many essays continued the "drive by" trend: a sentence that introduced a trope followed by one example followed by a rather general explanation of its role.

Many of the papers were lengthy. Even the scores of 1 and 2 had something to say and attempted analysis, though they fell drastically short, it is encouraging to see the work that teachers are doing and students are striving to accomplish.

What were common student errors or omissions?

Although far fewer did than in years past, students tended not to recognize the rhetorical situation the rhetor faces: the audience, the exigence, and the constraints. While many students seem to follow a formula such as SOAPS, identifying the speaker, occasion, audience, purpose, and situation, the students often did not use that information to help them find support in their analyses. When they analyze texts, students need to realize that one element of a text will not work with all audiences. Within their analyses, students need to explain why a specific element of the text works (or does not work) for a specific audience in a specific situation.

Another common omission was any discussion regarding rhetorical elements outside the classical rhetorical canon of style. Too many students relied exclusively on the canon of style in their analysis. While style is certainly one rhetorical element of a writer's text, it is not the only — or even the most important element. Students need to think much more about the writers' choices pertaining to the canons of invention and arrangement.

While a discussion of style can product a strong rhetorical analysis, students tend to merely identify numerous tropes and figures, sometimes correctly and sometimes not. Identification of a text's use of tropes might be interesting and erudite information; however, the names of the tropes are of little use in an analysis. Far more important is what that trope or figure does as well as how and why that trope works for the rhetor in a particular situation. The lowest essays are lists of strategies that do not connect a strategy to the writer's purpose.

Finally, as the Question Leader noted, another common problem was students' formulaic essay construction (noting two, three, or even four rhetorical choices in simple terms), which tends to lead to mid-level essays at best.

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?

First, teachers need to know that they have been doing a great job improving the teaching of the rhetorical analysis essay. Though there were many formulaic responses, most of these essays nevertheless identified elements of the rhetorical situation. Teachers need to continue this good work, asking their students to think much more about how an audience might react to different choices and how the writer anticipates that audience response. For example, Margaret Thatcher probably knew her audience was not comprised entirely of Reagan supporters; therefore, an example of Reagan's actions that were very Conservative in nature would not elicit sympathy from the entire audience. She needed to find examples that a multi-partisan audience could identify with. She made choices regarding the examples to get these non-Reagan supporters to feel for him.

Teachers also must recognize that, just as they instruct their students to first think about their ideas and the idea's organization when students write (not to first use specific tropes, words, or syntax), a student analyzing a text should begin looking at the ideas in the text and considering how the writer chooses to convey the ideas to the audience. Just as Aristotle and Cicero made the canon of style the third canon of rhetoric, teachers need to teach about style after they fully discuss the first and second canons, invention and arrangement respectively.

Teachers can also find ways to have students recognize that they analyze rhetorical choices all the time when they read texting messages from friends, think about conversations in the high school hallway, or make a decision to ignore a specific commercial. Teachers can start with this level of familiarity and connect it to analyses of more academic texts.

Finally, teachers should convey the message that even if the prompt calls for rhetorical strategies, students don't need to name and define the strategies. A rhetorical strategy is the same as a rhetorical choice. Students need to describe/explain the choices' or strategies' purpose and effect while connecting the choices or strategies to the text to which they apply.

Question 3

What was the intent of this question?

The "Argument Question" asked students to utilize their knowledge of the world as well as their personal experiences and observations to support a claim in response to a given question. This year's "Argument Question" first provided a quote from 19th-century Irish author Oscar Wilde asserting the socially progressive function of disobedience before asking students to take a "position on the extent to which Wilde's claims are valid." The phrasing of the question avoided prompting students to binary responses — arguing that Wilde is "right" or "wrong" — but instead encouraged students to develop a more nuanced position on Wilde's claim.

While it does not provide sources as does the "Synthesis Question," the "Argument Question" also demands support for the claims made by students, support that is carefully discussed so that the essay's audience will understand the reasoning behind it. In other words, this question is asking students to use rhetorical strategies to convince their audience that their claim is valid. These strategies include considering the students' own ethos (How do the students show they know what they are discussing? How do the students show they share the same values as the audience? How do they illustrate that the argument will benefit the audience), logos (Is the support acceptable to the audience? Is the support relevant to the claim? Is the support sufficient for the audience and the situation?), and pathos (Do the students align the audience with themselves? Do they alienate the audience? Do they move the audience with the support?).

How well did students perform on this question?

The adjusted mean score for 2016 was 4.50 out of 9, higher than last year's 4.06.

Students in significant numbers saw this prompt as highly approachable and seized the opportunity not only to showcase what they knew about history, literature, science, contemporary politics, and social movements about the connection between acts of disobedience and the advancement of social progress, but also to demonstrate how personal experiences within their classrooms, families, and communities demonstrated the power of individual assertiveness to impact others within their spheres of influence.

Successful essays tended to see the complexity surrounding the negative connotations of the word "disobedience" and the actual bravery and commitment necessary to effect change within a society or community, often noting how individuals like Rosa Parks and Galileo did more than just defy established social norms and traditional ways of thinking, but actually became the catalysts for larger advancements and improvements to come. The writers of these essays were able to develop cogent arguments that connected a variety of pieces of evidence in support of a central claim that demonstrated their understanding of the implications for future progress in the world that would value disobedience as a means of growth.

Students organized these successful essays around conceptual ideas (discrimination, inequality, justice) that allowed them to make connections among the wealth of evidence they provided and to build a foundation of solid reasoning to provide a contextual framework for the examples they selected. Logical transitions and a smooth flow from one idea to the next, regardless of paragraph indentation, allowed these students to present a clear argument of the ways in which disobedience may or may not promote social progress.

Mid-range papers tended to lead by evidence but often left the reader confused as to how the examples connected to the writer's claim about the extent to which Wilde's claims are valid. These papers were sometimes dominated by summaries of historical events, scientific discoveries, and literary plots, and they were often organized into formulaic five-paragraph formats that often waited until the end of the each paragraph to make a one-sentence connection between how the disobedient act did or did not advance social progress. Low-scoring papers failed to provide sufficient explanation for how the evidence helped to advance the argument, choosing instead to assume that a reader would fill in the gap. While a few low-scoring papers substituted a different task from the one specified in the prompt, these inadequate papers often had lapses in coherence that demonstrated these writers' difficulties in connecting the familiar evidence they provided with the more challenging requirement of explaining how that evidence advanced their arguments.

What were common student errors or omissions?

The most common student error was the tendency to rely too much on formula without thinking sufficiently. Students need to think more about their audience. What kinds of information will move their audience? What kinds of information will their audience be unfamiliar with and therefore will need more explanation? Students need to realize an argument is more than the listing of evidence. It involves thinking about what kinds of information will persuade an audience.

While students often had good examples, they didn't thoroughly answer why or how the examples served their perspective. Similarly, many essays had good examples, but each example in the essay made the same point, rather than advancing the argument and illustrating a different angle to the situation.

Another common problem was that students often assumed their reader would agree with them or would understand their supporting evidence without much explanation. In other words, when students made assertions, they assumed agreement. When they listed evidence, they assume their audience would have a world view similar to their own. For example, while personal examples are perfectly acceptable forms of support, many of the given personal examples were weak because they didn't always connect with the

prompt's question of why their disobedience helped society progress: students assumed the audience shared the students' interpretations of their personal examples.

A related but different problem was that students tended to provide detail and elaboration on narratives without thoroughly explaining how the narrative within their essay illustrated the validity of the students' claim. Students expected the reader to make the connection between the narrative and the claim; instead, they need to realize that what is implicit to them may not be clear to their reader. Similarly, students tended to repeat ideas without developing them. Students need to recognize that elaboration is not repetition.

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?

While it was clear that many students understood the value of providing examples and evidence to support a position, and while students seemed to be able to select appropriate evidence for their positions, teachers can help students understand that examples themselves are not automatically self-evident in the service of their argument. Students need continued practice in their classroom discussions and in their writing to articulate clearly how an example supports a given claim, recognizing that a skeptical audience will always ask questions such as “How? Why? What is your reasoning?” In other words, students need to realize that to write well they need to get outside of their own perspectives to understand the perspectives of the people they are hoping to convince.

Teachers can also help students understand that composing an academically sound argument means more than just providing three pieces of evidence to support a position. Students need to learn the importance of acknowledging the complexities behind larger issues, like disobedience and rebellion, that impact the human experience, and they need to learn how to incorporate this understanding into coherent, well-developed arguments that reflect critical thinking and rhetorical effectiveness.

Writing an argument is really about thinking. It is less about specific words or organizations than it is about finding what is it that will convince an audience, and then finding the words and organizations that convey the found ideas. Writing also involves thinking about the audience: what kinds of evidence will persuade that audience and how narratives or examples need to be interpreted for the audience.

Teachers can also realize that giving students some writing freedom will allow them to find ideas. There were many letters from students explaining in rich detail why they weren't going to respond to the prompt and outlining their lives and their lives' problems. Teachers can tap into students' existing abilities to write by giving students more freedom and fewer formulas. This freedom certainly needs to be tempered eventually with analysis and critique; however, this kind of writing — rather than repeated sample tests — can help students think while they write.