

Chief Reader Report on Student Responses: 2017 AP[®] English Language and Composition Free-Response Questions

• Number of Students Scored	579,426		
• Number of Readers	1,537		
• Score Distribution	Exam Score	N	%At
	5	52,636	9.1
	4	105,891	18.3
	3	160,372	27.7
	2	178,066	30.7
	1	82,461	14.2
• Global Mean	2.77		

The following comments on the 2017 free-response questions for AP[®] English Language and Composition were written by the Chief Reader, Elizabethada Wright of 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 preparation 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**Task:** Synthesis**Topic:** Public Libraries**Max. Points:** 9**Mean Score:** 4.8***What were responses expected to demonstrate in their response to this question?***

As in past years, Question 1, the synthesis question, asked students to compose an argument using at least three of the sources provided as well as the students' own knowledge of the world. In other words, the purpose of the question was to see how well students can integrate other people's arguments into their own. Additionally, the question intended to see if students can cite, either parenthetically or textually, ideas other than their own. The students' arguments should be original, not repeated summaries of the arguments within the sources. Within the students' responses, the students' position should drive the responses' logic. The sources should either provide evidence for the students' claims or create an intellectual dialogue in which the students' arguments participate. In other words, students do not necessarily have to agree with the sources; students can argue with the sources. However, in so doing, students need to analyze the strength of the sources provided, and if students cite and disagree with a source, mere contradiction or denial of the source's position is inadequate. Specifically, this year's synthesis question asked students to develop a position on the role, if any, that public libraries should serve in the future. For the purposes of scoring, "synthesis means using sources to develop a position and cite them accurately" (Scoring Guide). Students seemed to find the prompt accessible and most had much to say.

How well did the responses address the course content related to this question? How well did the responses integrate the skills required on this question?

Most students and teachers felt this year's question was on a topic easily accessible to students, and this mean—higher than last year's—reflects this easy access. Overall, almost all students seemed to find the prompt accessible and most had much to say.

The cognitive demand on students was similar to that required on previous synthesis questions: students must grasp the task requested in the prompt (i.e., what they are to argue), understand the arguments and content of the prompts, and synthesize some information from a minimum of three prompts into their own cognitive framework in order to make the students' own arguments.

The upper-level papers tended to go beyond the task at hand. Many argued with reference to larger, philosophical considerations of the role that libraries should serve in the future, often seamlessly paraphrasing and expanding upon the data provided by the sources, especially Source A, Kranich's view about the important role that libraries have played historically and currently as the "cornerstone of democracy." Upper-level students often argued that the public library should serve an important role in the future, yet upper-level essays also successfully argued convincingly the opposite: "[I]ts extinction is immediate." Many upper level essays presented Seigler's article, Source E, "The End of the Library" as the counterargument and then provided a rebuttal.

Overall, upper-level essays synthesized the sources in a variety of ways. Upper-level and mid-range essays often successfully used Source D about library usage and Source F regarding funding cuts to argue in support of the evolving functions of the library, as well as to argue that the role of the library will be less important in the future. Upper-level essays also tended to have a strong sense of audience; they seemed to be considering their rhetorical situation—writing for a group of teachers.

Mid-range students integrated their sources, though the writing tended to be rather pedestrian. Readers commented that these essays were often comprised of the five-paragraph essay, selecting three of the sources and discussing them sequentially. While these essays were a bit formulaic, they could still be adequate. Often students used the Orland, Illinois library calendar of activities and the PBS story on accessibility to electronic devices and materials accomplished through the efforts of the public library as two sources that supported the important role of libraries in the future.

Students of all scoring levels used personal anecdotes in support of their position with varying degrees of success. Successful essays connected their anecdotes in ways that moved their argument forward: "Libraries have been a

place, of not only research and free speech and community gatherings, but a place to be alone, to be quiet and reflective, to fully succumb to the writings of your favorite author, to every literary artist from Shakespeare to Mary Downing Hahn to Joseph Heller to Mark Twain.” The use of literary references often fit naturally and effectively into arguments; for example, Orwell and Bradbury.

What common student misconceptions or gaps in knowledge were seen in the responses to this question?

<i>Common Misconceptions/Knowledge Gaps</i>	<i>Responses that Demonstrate Understanding</i>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Weaker responses cited the sources and/or paraphrased them, sometimes doing both, assuming that the quote or paraphrasing alone was sufficient support for the essay’s claim. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Stronger responses integrated the sources into their arguments in various ways. The authors of these essays engaged the sources in dialogue, recognizing that sources often contradict each other and some sources make stronger arguments than others.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Weaker responses struggled to integrate sources into their arguments. They tended to make an assertion followed by a quotation but the argument remained at the undeveloped level. The sources tended to dominate the essay. These writers often listed what libraries do but included no discussion to develop their position. These students seemed to understand the sources’ arguments but were unable to determine how to use them to develop their own argument. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Stronger responses synthesized the sources in a variety of ways, effectively using sources to support their chosen argument. For example, upper-level essays often successfully used Source D about library usage and Source F regarding funding cuts to argue in support of the evolving functions of the library, as well as to argue that the role of the library will be less important in the future.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Weaker responses sometimes misinterpreted the sources, reflecting the writer’s difficulty in reading and understanding the sources. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Stronger responses demonstrated an understanding of the sources, which sources best served the writer’s needs, and how the sources could best be used in support of the student’s argument.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Weaker responses did not recognize the complexities of the prompt’s question. For example, the use of the term “serve” in the prompt tended to befuddle many of the authors of weaker responses. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Stronger responses recognized the complexities of the prompt’s question, also noting the nuances of terms such as “serve.”
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Weaker responses struggled with the claims within the sources. For example, the humorous tone of Source E, “The End of the Library,” treating statements made as fact. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Stronger responses recognized the nuances within the sources, recognizing that often a writer presents a counter position in addition to articulating a claim. In other words, stronger responses recognized that <i>not all</i> information within a source supports the source’s position.

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Weaker responses inadequately developed a position on the role, if any, that libraries should serve in the future. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Stronger responses had an easily recognizable position on the role libraries might have in the future and also clearly connected the evidence and logic to the position.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Weaker responses failed to recognize their audience, assuming the readers' agreement with claims or making assumptions about the readers' understandings of their external evidence. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Stronger responses tended to have a strong sense of audience. They seemed to be considering their rhetorical situation—writing for a group of teachers.

Based on your experience at the AP[®] Reading with student responses, what advice would you offer to teachers to help them improve the student performance on the exam?

Teachers can help students read and analyze exemplary authors' arguments as a strategy toward more effective writing of arguments. Using effective reading skills and strategies is a daily endeavor. Teachers can also help students by focusing on the rhetorical situation and by asking them to evaluate their audience. What evidence will best persuade their audience? Then, helping students evaluate and choose sources in service to their arguments is a next step.

Question #2**Task:** Rhetorical Analysis **Topic:** Clare Boothe Luce speech**Max. Points:** 9**Mean Score:** 3.99***What were responses expected to demonstrate in their response to this question?***

Question 2, the rhetorical analysis question, asked students to explain the choices made by the writer or speaker of the passage provided. Though it is not considered an “argument question,” it asked students to take a position on what choices the writer or speaker makes. The question’s intent was to see how well students understand the rhetorical situation of the passage’s writer or speaker and how these choices address this situation. In other words, the question asked that students understand the purpose of the writer’s or speaker’s text, who the audience of this text is, what the relationship is between that audience and the writer/speaker, and what the audience’s attitude might be toward the writer’s/speaker’s purpose. With this understanding, the passage then required students to articulate how the rhetor’s choices address those complex relationships. The 2017 Question 2 passage was Clare Boothe Luce’s introduction to her 1960 speech given at the Women’s National Press Club. The passage offered students abundant opportunities to analyze *how* Luce uses the introduction to her speech to, as the task stated, “prepare the audience for her message.” The passage and task, which reflect the language of the Course Description in terms of the study and teaching of rhetorical analysis, challenged students to think about how Luce managed her difficult task (of being asked to speak about problems with the press) with her audience of fellow journalists, the very people she would be criticizing.

How well did the responses address the course content related to this question? How well did the responses integrate the skills required on this question?

The adjusted mean score was 3.99 out of a possible 9 points, lower than last year’s 4.38, as well as the previous year’s 4.04. Overall, many students were up to the task and able to enter a conversation about the text and about its purpose. Coupled with the accessibility of the text (save the occasional vocabulary missteps regarding “cant” and the misinterpretation of Luce’s allusion to prominent preachers), this year’s rhetorical analysis question yielded lengthier essays and encouraged students to make an attempt to present analysis. Although we still saw students struggle with this, it is encouraging to see students feel more able to make these attempts, rather than abandon all hope because they really don’t know what “hypophora” means (neither did many readers).

The rhetorical analysis question demands that even before students analyze the specifics of the text, students must understand 1) the author’s purpose in creating the text; 2) the problem that the text addresses; and 3) the text’s audience’s attitudes toward the author’s purpose, the situation’s problem, and the author him/herself. Once students understand these three elements of the text’s rhetorical situation, then they can begin to analyze how specifics within the text work to serve the author’s purpose. In other words, students must first understand the purpose of Luce’s introduction, what problem she faces in giving the introduction, and how her audience feels about Luce’s discussion of the press’s problems, the press’s problems themselves, and Luce herself—even before they think about specifics of evidence, emotion, credibility, organization or style. This does not mean students have to write long paragraphs about the rhetorical situation before discussing specifics; it means students have to think carefully about these elements and integrate the elements within their discussions of the text’s content.

The passage offered students abundant opportunities to analyze *how* Luce uses the introduction to her speech to “prepare the audience for her message.” More adept students recognized and discussed Luce’s sense of her place in the rhetorical situation, along with her use of humor, while other students focused on more conventional rhetorical tropes, such as anaphora and allusion. Many students discussed the syntactical and tonal choices made by Luce. Many students were able to provide effective and fluent discussions of these choices because the students focused much more on *how* the choices created a particular effect, rather than on *what* they were. We also saw the classical rhetorical appeals used often—to varying degrees of success—to explain Luce’s introduction in the context of the speech that was to follow.

What common student misconceptions or gaps in knowledge were seen in the responses to this question?

<i>Common Misconceptions/Knowledge Gaps</i>	<i>Responses that Demonstrate Understanding</i>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Weaker responses struggled with the passage as an introduction and therefore struggled equally with the task. They treated the passage as an independent speech and sometimes made no mention of it as Luce’s means of preparing the audience, instead choosing to discuss the passage as Luce’s message. These essays typically did not reach the “adequate” level because they did not include the context of the passage as an introduction. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Stronger responses were able to embed their discussion of the passage as Luce’s introduction within their analysis of strategies and were much more successful.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Weaker responses saw rhetorical choices as mere “devices,” often listing categories of rhetorical figures or tropes as some kind of magical tools. While discussion of figures and tropes could help the student writer explain how Luce worked to prepare her audience for her message, the student writer’s mere identification of such figures and tropes--without a discussion of how the choice to use them worked in Luce’s particular rhetorical situation--created inadequate essays. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Stronger responses took advantage of the abundant opportunities to analyze <i>how</i> Luce uses the introduction to her speech to “prepare the audience for her message.” More adept students recognized and discussed Luce’s sense of her place in the rhetorical situation, along with her use of humor, while other students focused on more conventional rhetorical tropes such as anaphora and allusion. Many students discussed the syntactical and tonal choices made by Luce. Many students were able to provide effective and fluent discussions of these choices because the students focused much more on <i>how</i> the choices created a particular effect, rather than on <i>what</i> they were. We also saw the classical rhetorical appeals used often—to varying degree of success—to explain Luce’s introduction in the context of the speech that was to follow.

Based on your experience at the AP[®] Reading with student responses, what advice would you offer to teachers to help them improve the student performance on the exam?

Teachers should focus on students’ ability to read rhetorically. Teachers should help students grapple on a broader level, helping students understand how the writer’s choices address this rhetorical situation. Although the knowledge of specific features of language are an important part of this reading and thinking, teachers should emphasize that students’ analyses of passages should occur with the rhetorical context of the passage in mind. Teachers should also recognize that knowledge of specific features alone is insufficient for understanding rhetorical analysis. Focusing solely or predominantly on “devices” or the strategy of style deprives students of understanding the broader context of rhetorical choices. A rhetorical analysis also considers the ways a writer organizes information and what kinds of support a writer uses to achieve her/his purpose: for example, considering the audience’s relationship to this support of writers’ claims. Teaching this kind of reading and thinking will help students avoid the tendency to reach definite (and too often incorrect) conclusions about what a text does/is doing to an audience, and instead focus on the intended purpose of a text.

Teachers should continue to move students away from the “what” and toward the “how” and “why” carefully crafted language is able to accomplish any given task. Teachers should encourage students to work to understand writers’ purposes, as well as the audience’s attitude toward the purpose and toward the writer. Encouraging such understandings will help students adapt to different texts and be able to see how a writer/author/speaker attempts to move an audience.

Additionally, teachers should also encourage students to understand that an analysis is not a piecemeal identification of elements within a text. An analysis requires a holistic perspective of the text, describing how the various elements of a text work with each other to persuade an audience in a particular context.

Question #3**Task:** Argument**Topic:** Artifice**Max. Points:** 9**Mean Score:** 4.26***What were responses expected to demonstrate in their response to this question?***

Question 3, the argument question, like the other two questions, asked students to take a position on an issue that the question presents. This question provided less supplementary material than did the other two questions, and it relied on students' knowledge of the world to provide support for the claims that the students made. In other words, students did not need to cite or analyze other writers' works. Question 3 did, however, intend to see how well students can use logical explanations and evidence of facts or events to support their claims. This year's Question 3 asked students to develop a position on Chris Hedges' claim that "the most essential skill . . . is artifice." The question included an extended and complex excerpt from Hedges' book *The Empire of Illusion*. Focusing on the arenas of "political theater" and "consumer culture," Hedges asserts the power of artificial "personal narrative" and "emotional appeal" as tools of persuasion. Hedges' rich and evocative language served as a springboard for many essays: students seized, for example, on his assertion that "mass propaganda [can] create a sense of faux intimacy"; likewise, many students took their lead from the concluding line of the passage, where Hedges maintains that an "image-based culture communicates through narratives, pictures, and pseudo-drama."

How well did the responses address the course content related to this question? How well did the responses integrate the skills required on this question?

The adjusted mean score was 4.26 out of a possible 9 points, slightly lower than last year's mean of 4.5 but still higher than the previous year's 4.04.

Like the other two questions, this one demands that students think about what their claims are and how best to support them. However, unlike the other questions, the argument question demands that students search their own informational resources to find specifics from which they can draw their logic and evidence. In other words, this question demands that students call upon their knowledge of the world (e.g., both academic and non-academic information) to find the most appropriate evidence for their claims and that the students can explain to their audience how and why this evidence supports their arguments.

This year's prompt casts a wide net. Responses ranged from political and historical approaches to responses that focused on consumerism, materialism, and advertising. The prompt drew many students into political discussions, but some of the best essays took on consumer culture. Students explored the artifice they found in advertisements and in pop culture: they wrote about reality television, glorification of sports icons, and media coverage of pop celebrities. Many students drew evidence from their experiences living in a world dominated by social media, a world in which images were frequently presentations of self.

Of course, most students focused on standard definitions of artifice and leaned on unsurprising examples. Historical evidence was likely to address Hitler's rise to power in Germany; political evidence tended to focus on last year's presidential election (though there was much discussion of a variety of American presidents); literary examples abounded, with *Gatsby* making his predicted appearance (though mention of Fitzgerald's novel was not as frequent as references to *The Hunger Games*).

Better essays saw, appreciated, and worked with the nuances they found in Hedges' thinking. They used sophisticated language and thinking and they maintained a mature control of tone. They selected apt examples, drawing on Rousseau and Machiavelli and on Plato's Allegory of the Cave. Students with a rich command of history tended to fare especially well. Andrew Jackson's ascension to power, for example, was offered as evidence in essays spanning the breadth of the scoring rubric, but effective essays were able to summon specific details of Jackson's policies and decisions. While students were not penalized if they took an easier route (e.g., "I agree or disagree with Hedges because . . ."), many of the most interesting essays we read were more complex (e.g., "While this might appear true at first, Hedges' claim ultimately falls apart when . . ." or "The challenge of artifice comes when truths are revealed . . ."). These qualified responses allowed students to show deeper critical thinking.

Selection and presentation of evidence is a critical skill in the argumentative essay. It remains the case that many essays offer three paragraphs of evidence. Many of these essays certainly found their way to top scores. One of the best essays we read applied three critical aspects of Hedges' passage to Trump's campaign tactics, and it was exhilarating in style and development. Other successful essays presented a variety of evidence but drew connections between the examples, highlighting similarities and contrasts. Essays that presented three distinct examples (for instance, one historical, one literary, and one personal) tended not to find the very top scoring points.

As good versions of Question 3 manage to do, this year's question invited students of all abilities into a space that challenged their interpretive and compositional skills. The best essays were impressive, some even astonishing, in their successes. And essays at all scoring points elicited rich, earnest engagement from students. Students found this an apt invitation given the political climate of the day, and one hopes that this question will be used in the classroom for years to come.

What common student misconceptions or gaps in knowledge were seen in the responses to this question?

<i>Common Misconceptions/Knowledge Gaps</i>	<i>Responses that Demonstrate Understanding</i>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Weaker responses tended toward simplification. Instead of addressing Hedges' assertions about artifice, they reduced his argument to less complex terms. They talked about the danger of telling lies; they made basic claims about advertisements not being accurate. Often inadequate essays made very generalized statements. All politicians lie, we were told, and all people believe them. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Stronger responses were composed word-by-word and conveyed meaning with convincing specificity and aptness. They saw, appreciated, and worked with the nuances they found in Hedges' thinking. They used sophisticated language and thinking and they maintained a mature control of tone. They selected apt examples, drawing on Rousseau and Machiavelli, on Plato's Allegory of the Cave. Students with a rich command of history tended to fare especially well. Andrew Jackson's ascension to power, for example, was offered as evidence in essays spanning the breadth of the scoring rubric, but effective essays were able to summon specific details of Jackson's policies and decisions.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Weaker responses cobbled together chunks of familiar language and quoted material and in doing so lost clarity. They struggled to manage the word artifice itself -- they wrote things like "He was an artifice person" or even "He artificed about..." 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Stronger responses riffed on linguistic connections between the words art, artifice, and artificiality. They noted the connections and differences between the words, often citing etymological relationships between words.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Weaker responses sometimes made one of two moves: 1) they substituted lying or deceit for artifice, and/or 2) they avoided the topic by suggesting that something else was the most important skill, such as honesty or integrity. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Stronger responses explained how artifice was used as a means for deception. For example, these responses detailed propagandistic strategies used to move audiences emotionally rather than to think about the logic of claims.

- Weaker responses did not understand the term *artifice*, and they did not use the information provided in the prompt to guide them to an understanding of the term.

- Stronger responses used the language of the passage to find their bearings and make sense of the prompt. In fact, the unfamiliar word might have slowed them down for a moment or two in helpful ways because it required students to think through the passage.

Based on your experience at the AP[®] Reading with student responses, what advice would you offer to teachers to help them improve the student performance on the exam?

If there was initial trepidation that students would be lured into bombast and vitriol by the political environment of our day, these concerns were quickly put to rest. Certainly, the prompt will be useful to teachers in better defining to their students the nature of argument, particularly in distinguishing argument from simple description or narration.

This year's prompt suggests teachers tell students that if there is a difficult term within the prompt, they should look for clues within the prompt to help them with the definition. Avoiding the term and discussing something else (or substituting the difficult term with another) will not get students upper level scores.

Additionally, this year's prompt allows me to repeat many of the same messages I'd offered last year.

- 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 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.
- Teachers must help students understand that 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. 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.