



Student Performance Q&A: 2009 AP[®] European History Free-Response Questions

The following comments on the 2009 free-response questions for AP[®] European History were written by the Chief Reader, Jeffrey Hamilton of Baylor University in Waco, Texas. 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?

The purpose of the document-based question (DBQ) is to assess the degree to which students can analyze various types of historical documents in order to construct a meaningful analytical essay. Students' responses are evaluated on the extent to which they meet the requirements specified in the core scoring guidelines. Students who exceed these requirements can then earn additional points in the expanded core, which is based on holistic assessment.

This particular DBQ asked students to construct a response to a two-part prompt asking them to analyze attitudes and evaluate motivations behind European acquisition of African colonies. Students were provided with 12 documents on which to base their responses and were also given two maps as historical background.

How well did students perform on this question?

The mean score was 3.59 out of a possible 9 points. Student responses varied widely in terms of their ability to demonstrate elements in the core scoring guidelines. The question provided able students with ample opportunities to develop effective responses.

Most students were already somewhat familiar with the topic of imperialism. Most of the documents were straightforward, and students were able to use them effectively. The documents lent themselves to multiple means of grouping; most students were able to discern appropriate and specific analytical categories supported by references to relevant documents.

What were common student errors or omissions?

The core scoring guidelines asked that students provide an appropriate, explicitly stated thesis that addressed *all* parts of the question. Some students failed to recognize that this question had two distinct parts (i.e., *analyze attitudes* and *evaluate motivations*). Further, some students had difficulty expressing distinctions between attitudes and motivations. Most commonly, they omitted explicit references to attitudes.

Several documents were challenging for some students. In particular, students sometimes misused Documents 3, 6, and 7. Some students seemed unsure in their interpretations of Document 3 (Bismarck). In addition, students frequently missed the critical tone of Documents 6 (Williams) and 7 (Clark), simply taking the words of the documents at face value.

Another area in which students sometimes seemed to have difficulty was with developing appropriate point-of-view analysis. Some students failed even to make an attempt at this required element. Others took a very formulaic approach, relying solely on words such as “bias” without offering any meaningful explanation of *how* and *why* a document might exhibit bias.

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 is critical that students recognize that a prompt may have multiple parts requiring the construction of a thesis that explicitly addresses all components of the question. The thesis must also be specific enough to reflect an analytical approach to the documents. In other words, relying only on general analytical categories (e.g., economic, political, social) that are presented without specific evidence from the documents is insufficient.

Students could benefit from an ongoing emphasis on document analysis. They often took documents at face value and neglected to consider tone, nuance, and intent in their analyses. While there has been improvement in point-of-view analysis, students still need continued practice in this area. Students must make a reasonable attempt to explain *why* a source expresses a particular point of view, instead of simply making unsubstantiated claims about bias or credibility. Moreover, students could benefit from additional instruction in other means of demonstrating point of view, such as relating authorial point of view to the author’s place in society and recognizing that different kinds of documents serve different kinds of purposes.

Question 2

What was the intent of this question?

The question required students to examine a mainstream topic (the fall of communism in Eastern Europe) from an unusual perspective. Some historical problems (such as the causes of the French Revolution or the First World War) are analyzed by textbooks and instructors from the perspective of long-term and short-term factors, but the collapse of communism is approached from other perspectives (the confrontation between superpowers during the Cold War; the political, economic, and social problems that weakened communism; the relations between the Soviet Union and its Eastern European satellites). Therefore, this question required students to create an analytical framework on the spot rather than simply repeat information about the Cold War or the end of

communism. The question also served to remind teachers that they must cover contemporary history in order to properly prepare their students for the exam, and they cannot afford to neglect any one region of the continent in their courses.

How well did students perform on this question?

The mean score was 2.65 out of a possible 9 points. Although many essays demonstrated exemplary mastery of the chronology, the majority were mediocre. Many students knew little about the history of Europe in the post–1945 era, which suggests that their teachers did not finish the course in time for the AP Exam. A significant number of students also demonstrated uncertainty when confronted with the terms *long-term* and *short-term*.

What were common student errors or omissions?

- Misunderstanding or neglecting the concepts of long-term and short-term factors.
- Demonstrating lack of knowledge about the post–1945 period.
- Failing to provide an acceptable thesis statement or paragraph; many students paraphrased the question and went no further in constructing a thesis.
- Confusing different countries, especially Czechoslovakia and Romania.
- Offering only sweeping and superficial assertions with no supporting evidence. According to some responses, Eastern Europeans were always revolting against bloodthirsty dictators or were starving to death due to the complete absence of food in stores. Some of the weakest essays degenerated into triumphalism (e.g., “Communism was doomed from the start,” “Dictatorships never win”).
- Conflating Questions 2 and 3: many responses began by citing the dates of Question 3 (1918–1948) and its prompts (diplomatic and political problems) but then went on to discuss the resistance to communism and its fall as though the events of 1989 had occurred in 1948.

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?

Students need to be taught the components of analytical essay writing. A paraphrase or restatement of the question does not constitute a thesis. Requiring students to spend five to seven minutes formulating a thesis before they can begin writing (a variation on the DBQ requirement) may prove helpful. Another approach is to require students to write a thesis paragraph for a question and score it before they write the body of the essay.

Teachers may wish to cover the post–1945 period at the start of the school year, rather than adopting a traditional chronological approach. Ultimately, however, some teachers need to reevaluate their coverage of the material and sacrifice some depth in their coverage of other subjects. The *AP European History Course Description* requires teachers to explain contemporary history to their students, and students will continue to be held accountable for such information on the AP Exam.

Question 3

What was the intent of this question?

The intent of this question was for students to identify and analyze political and diplomatic problems in two Eastern European states “in the period 1918 to 1948,” which encompassed the time between the two World Wars and the Second World War and its immediate aftermath. In order to respond effectively, students had to identify problems such as conflicts with ethnic minorities, threats from Soviet Russia or Nazi Germany, difficulties in establishing and maintaining democratic regimes in the wake of the Treaty of Versailles, and difficulties creating alliances or assuring national security. Austria and Czechoslovakia were both overtaken by Hitler before the Second World War began, and Poland was the first victim of *blitzkrieg*. In the postwar era, Austria alone escaped Soviet domination. Hungary managed to be on the losing side in both wars. Students were asked to “consider” the 30-year period, which means that the discussion should have covered events or issues within the period, but students were not required to deal with every phase of the period.

How well did students perform on this question?

Students had great difficulty with this question, and their overall performance was very weak. The mean score was 2.68 out of a possible 9 points. Few students had specific knowledge of internal political problems though some were able to talk about ethnic minorities.

Even the best students had trouble distinguishing political from diplomatic problems. In the realm of diplomacy, some students did better by backfilling what they knew about Hitler’s foreign policy into a discussion of Czechoslovakia (Sudetenland/Munich Crisis) and Poland (invasion and war). Responses showed a great deal of confusion about the time period; most students remembered the Polish partitions and Austria–Hungary, but they knew little about these countries during the specified time period.

Many students struggled to cite what they did know about Eastern Europe or about the period that related to the question. There was much discussion of the Great Depression and economic problems, such as hyperinflation.

What were common student errors or omissions?

Students seemed to know little about specific Eastern European countries. Of the four countries cited, Hungary was mentioned least often while Czechoslovakia and Poland were mentioned the most. Another major problem was that Question 2, which was in the same selection group as Question 3, was on Eastern Europe and the collapse of communism. Weaker students confused and conflated the two questions.

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?

Teachers should recognize that Eastern Europe, particularly in the twentieth century, needs to be given some attention. Many of that century's major events and trends (e.g., the World Wars, the rise and fall of communism, the growth of nationalism) were as important in Eastern Europe as they were in Western Europe, and the region can be dealt with in the same narrative framework that is used to discuss Western Europe in the twentieth century.

Question 4

What was the intent of this question?

This question enabled students to show their knowledge regarding very traditional and mainstream topics in the study of European history: the Enlightenment, Enlightened Despots, and the application or nonapplication of Enlightened ideals by those monarchs. Like other free-response questions on the exam, this question also addressed Eastern European history but without specific stress on Russia and/or twentieth-century communism.

How well did students perform on this question?

The mean score was 2.82 out of a possible 9 points. Students who had been taught to read and address all parts of a question had the ability to write strong responses to this question. Even relatively short answers could score in the upper range (6 to 9 points) simply because they addressed with specific evidence all the issues demanded by the prompt.

It was very clear that for the high-scoring students, knowledge of the Enlightenment had been well taught and absorbed. A large number of students, both those earning high scores and those earning low scores, were well informed with regard to the actions of both monarchs named in the prompt.

What were common student errors or omissions?

The major error for this particular question was students' failure to link the advancements or nonadvancements of the two monarchs to specific Enlightenment ideals. Linkage was often merely implied without specificity: for example, "Frederick the Great was an Enlightened monarch. Among the actions he took were. . . ." This type of answer, found too often, failed to prove to Exam Readers that the student was actually aware of why those actions might, in fact, be considered enlightened.

Among the lower-scoring essays, students wrote about what they could recall about the Enlightenment, Frederick, or Joseph, and omitted the other tasks. The most common omission, however, was students' failure to specify how monarchs did *not* advance Enlightened ideals. Students either did not know this information or failed to understand the prompt's demand.

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?

Students need to be made aware that AP Exam questions almost always have multiple tasks. With that fact in mind, students must be made comfortable with identifying *all* the tasks of a question before they begin answering it, and they must be encouraged to review their answer to ensure that they have indeed covered all of them. This process can be taught from the very beginning of an AP European History course by using questions from previously administered AP Exams and creating exercises that help students identify multiple tasks. Teachers should make students aware that AP Exam questions never ask students simply to repeat memorized information but instead require them to select information from various sources and to combine that information into a cogent response.

Question 5

What was the intent of this question?

The intent of the question was for students to investigate the phenomenon of economic decline on the part of two major European powers by the end of the seventeenth century. Spain and the Dutch Republic were two enormously wealthy European states in the sixteenth century, but within one hundred years, both were mere shadows of their former glory. The question asked students to investigate what happened economically and why. While both Spain and the Dutch Republic declined economically for similar reasons—military expenditures, inflation, and population issues—the economic decline of Spain was largely self-inflicted, but the economic decline of the Dutch Republic was a crisis of geography. By comparing and contrasting economic factors, students should have recognized that the decline of Spain was absolute in relation to other European powers, while the economic decline of the Dutch Republic was relative to the rise of England and France.

How well did students perform on this question?

The mean score was 2.65 out of a possible 9 points. A minority of students showed a tendency to write very strong responses well, while a majority of the responses were weak. Because of the specific nature of the question, there were few mid-range responses.

What were common student errors or omissions?

The major problem seen in responses to this question was a failure to accomplish both of the tasks specified in the prompt. The bulk of the essays either *only* compared or *only* contrasted. Only the stronger essays (6 to 9 points) did both. Most students had little trouble identifying differences, but only the best essays recognized similarities. Since students tended to either just compare or just contrast, many of the theses reflected the imbalance inherent in these responses.

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?

More time should be spent throughout the year on teaching different types of question prompts. The major challenge with this question for most students was how to format an essay for a compare-and-contrast question. One suggestion that would help many students would be to show them how to answer this type of question with only two body paragraphs: one paragraph for comparisons and one paragraph for contrasts. While this is not the only way to address a compare-and-contrast question, the problem for many students is that when an essay consists of more than two body paragraphs, it becomes disorganized. Many students struggle to write clearly organized compare-and-contrast essays with multiple body paragraphs.

Teachers also need to demonstrate the difference between historical specificity and historical analysis. What was missing in many responses to this question was historical evidence. Students tend to answer history questions with broad, vague, and very general statements. To get at least into the middle-scoring range (4 to 5 points), students must be able to support their statements with historical evidence. Classroom time needs to be devoted to teaching specificity: specific dates, specific events, specific wars, specific battles, specific individuals, and so on. Once students have mastered historical specificity, they can then move on to historical analysis.

For this question, the main distinction between a middle-scoring response and a higher-scoring response was the presence of some historical analysis in the higher-scoring response. Weaker essays (0 to 3 points) were broad, vague, general, and simplistic. The middle-range essays (4 to 5 points) tended to read as factual narrative. Stronger essays (6 to 9 points) were balanced between factual historical narrative and historical analysis. Students should be taught to strive for historical analysis.

Question 6

What was the intent of this question?

The intent of this question was for students to place the Thirty Years' War in a larger diplomatic, social, political, and/or economic context. Students were expected to analyze several outcomes of that conflict that established it as a major transitional event linking one era of European history to the next.

How well did students perform on this question?

The mean score was 3.97 out of a possible 9 points. Many students demonstrated their knowledge of the period and its impact on the future of Europe. They were able to look at the events between 1618 and 1648 and delineate several essential ways in which this period was a turning point, in many cases supporting their claims with compelling specific evidence. Some commonly cited turning points included:

- The end of religious warfare
- The rise of France

- The decline of Spain
- The decline of the Holy Roman Empire and the confirmation of German fragmentation
- The rise of the Netherlands
- The changes in diplomatic methods
- The impact on military methods, tactics, and strategies

Some students also discussed the impact of the Thirty Years' War on intellectual trends during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, specifically how the severity of the war influenced Thomas Hobbes and how the religious toleration that came about after the war contributed to the rationalism of the Enlightenment.

Many students also demonstrated their ability to present their knowledge in clearly organized essays. Introductory paragraphs often contained distinct, well-defined theses. Subsequent paragraphs then elaborated on the thesis in an orderly manner, though given the pressure of time, students often brought in additional turning points as they developed their essays.

What were common student errors or omissions?

- Focusing on the Protestant Reformation or the 1618–1648 chronology instead of the impact of the Thirty Years' War on subsequent European history.
- Failing to use specific evidence or using inaccurate evidence (if there was no evidence or if the one example given was incorrect, then students lost credit for that turning point).
- Misunderstanding the nature of the Thirty Years' War: misidentifying the key participants and/or confusing the issues involved.
- Using very generalized and vague thesis statements.

More specific errors students often made included the following misinterpretations:

- Identifying the Thirty Years' War as being the first war fought over nonreligious issues.
- Claiming the Treaty of Westphalia specifically granted religious toleration and freedom of religion for private citizens.
- Confusing the events of the Peace of Augsburg with the Peace of Westphalia.
- Stating the Holy Roman Empire was destroyed in 1648.
- Including Britain in the discussion.

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?

- Teach students to read the question more carefully so that their answer addresses what the question actually asks and avoids wasting time with irrelevancies (e.g., recounting the beginning of the Protestant Reformation).
- Help students to improve their ability to write complete and clear thesis statements that directly address what a question asks.
- Remind students that claims without evidence have little value (some students need a better understanding of what constitutes specific evidence).
- Teach students that people can be driven by numerous motivations (e.g., political, religious, and economic factors) at the same time, and indeed they almost always are.
- Require students to make *explicit* connections between the idea they are discussing and what a question is asking; for example, if they say that the inclusion of Calvinism at the Peace of Westphalia is a turning point, they need to spell out why it is and not leave the Readers to fill in that crucial information (too many times the significance of an event or development was only implied rather than made explicit).

Question 7

What was the intent of this question?

This question required students to demonstrate their knowledge of the Scientific Revolution through a discussion of the achievements of three of the leading figures of the age. The question further guided students to demonstrate how the Scientific Revolution created a distinct change from the way the world (nature) and knowledge had been viewed in earlier ages.

How well did students perform on this question?

The mean score was 3.69 out of a possible 9 points. Most of the students who selected this question had something to say. A high percentage of them felt they knew something about Galileo and Newton and so wrote biographies and accounts of those men's accomplishments. Fewer were comfortable with Descartes. Students who understood the prompt generally made a valid attempt at addressing the themes presented by it. The question covered a mainstream topic and garnered respectable answers from qualified students.

What were common student errors or omissions?

Many students failed to get past discussing the three individuals. Weaker students generally ignored any discussion of the themes (traditional interpretations of nature and traditional sources of knowledge). Additionally, many students had a great deal of trouble dealing with Descartes. Overall, students did not respond to the full prompt.

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 number one problem seemed to be that students did not read and fully comprehend the task laid out before them. A serious and direct effort should be made to instruct students to fully address all aspects of a prompt. For this question, far too many students ignored the themes and focused their answer directly on the three individuals. The ability to craft a thesis, organize a paper, and develop an argument is essential, and AP European History teachers must devote time to honing students' writing skills. Students need a great deal of practice with writing a valid, explicit thesis statement that addresses the *entire prompt*, and they need to be taught to analyze a prompt and then cover all its requirements.

For help with *all* aspects of teaching the course, new and relatively inexperienced AP teachers are encouraged to attend AP workshops and Summer Institutes and join the AP European History Electronic Discussion Group (EDG) on AP Central[®]. The EDG, in particular, represents a great, no-cost instructional guide for teachers of this course.