



Student Performance Q&A: 2012 AP® European History Free-Response Questions

The following comments on the 2012 free-response questions for AP® European History were written by the Chief Reader, Jeffrey S. 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purpose of the document-based question (DBQ) was to assess the degree to which students could analyze various types of historical documents in order to construct a meaningful analytical essay. Students' essays were evaluated on the extent to which they met the requirements specified in the core scoring guidelines. Students who exceeded these requirements could earn additional points in the expanded core, which is based on holistic assessment. Students were tasked with analyzing 12 documents to identify arguments about how the lives of European workers could be improved.

How well did students perform on this question?

The mean score was 4.26 out of a possible 9 points.

Many students performed well because both the question and the documents allowed for open interpretation and discussion. Students were required to address at least two arguments concerning ways to improve European workers' lives, and many students discussed three or more. Additionally, students were able to form more than the required three groupings, often seeing four or five arguments.

Because the documents covered the expanse of the nineteenth century (1803–1896) and the words “emerged over the course of the nineteenth century” were part of the prompt, the more sophisticated essays also factored in change over time. Moreover, stronger essays incorporated relevant outside information to augment their analyses of the documents.

What were common student errors or omissions?

Although students correctly interpreted most documents, some found certain documents confusing. Some students misunderstood Document 2 (David Ricardo, *Principles of Political Economy and Taxation*, 1817) because of its apparent irony concerning the possibility of population control. Document 10 (John Stuart

Mill, *Chapters on Socialism*, 1879) confused students because the title of the work led students to conclude that the author supported socialism, whereas in fact he opposed it.

As has been true for several years, many students — even those who presented otherwise sophisticated essays — did not analyze point of view in the requisite number of documents. As a result, these students were not awarded the point-of-view core point, which held their overall score to 5 points.

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 DBQ is a skills-based exercise. Providing solid instruction in developing the following skills will result in higher scores:

- *Thesis*: Students require frequent practice in developing a thesis that addresses all aspects of the question. The thesis should appear in the opening paragraph of the essay, and ideally all components of the thesis should be contained in one clear, concise, and comprehensive sentence. Additionally, students who use the terms of the question (in this case, “arguments”) in formulating the thesis usually present clearer, more explicit — and therefore acceptable — responses to the prompt.
- *Point of view*: Of the six standards that constitute the core, this one requires the most cogent analysis from students. Students need to be taught to identify point-of-view analysis in ways that explain *why* the author or source of the document makes the claims stated. They must thoroughly explain the author’s perspective or the document’s purpose. More particularly, students should be instructed in the multiple ways to identify point-of-view: author’s place in society; reliability of the source; recognition of the purpose or tone of the document; and so on. Students should also be reminded to develop different forms of expression rather than repeating the same lead-in to every example (e.g., “This source is not reliable because ...,” or “It is not surprising that ...”).
- *Grouping*: Workable, meaningful grouping is driven by the development of a solid thesis. Students should analyze the documents to impose order on them, thereby creating acceptable groupings that address the question. Good essay organization is important in this regard; topic sentences that indicate the theme of the paragraph suggest that a student has organized the documents purposefully. Simply mixing documents in a paragraph without regard for whether they support the topic of the paragraph or are linked to each other will not earn credit for the fourth standard, requiring the use of the documents to support the thesis.

Question 2

What was the intent of this question?

This question required students to analyze the causal relationship between various technological developments in the period 1450–1600 and increased state power. These developments included advances in printing, shipbuilding, navigation, firearms, mining, and astronomy. These in turn led to increased naval and military power, lessened the influence of the nobility and church to the benefit of the state, enhanced state communication and propaganda, and expanded territory and income. The way the question was phrased required students to present at least two examples of technical innovation, with causal linkage to at least one form of expansion of state power.

How well did students perform on this question?

The mean score was 2.96 out of a possible 9 points.

Students generally responded well to the required discussion of technological innovation. Many offered multiple pieces of evidence with varying degrees of detail, often describing not only the technological innovation but its impact (navigation/shipbuilding–exploration; movable type printing–decrees/propaganda; firearms–mercenary army/naval forces). However, many students struggled to offer direct causal linkage of these innovations to increased state power. Some regarded this linkage as self-evident or made implied references; others discussed it in general rather than specific terms. One notable exception was the impact that the printing press had in diminishing the influence of the church and increasing state power. Textbooks often explicitly discuss this phenomenon in a separate paragraph or section, and so it was readily available to many students.

What were common student errors or omissions?

Many students substituted or conflated the Industrial Revolution with the Age of Exploration and the emergence of the Scientific Revolution. This common error seriously marred many essays. In addition, many students did not establish in their thesis any clear causal linkages between technological innovation and expanding state power.

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 would probably benefit from more chronological overview. Whereas students often place developments by means of chronological place holders (Renaissance, Age of Discovery, French Revolution, etc.), they struggle to connect events to specific time periods (1450–1600). An overview of chronology may therefore be helpful.

Teachers should emphasize the central importance of a clear thesis. For this prompt, causal linkage of all elements was essential for an essay with otherwise good evidence to receive a high score. It may helpful to have students specifically address the “how” in their theses.

This question required students to draw causal linkages between topics commonly discussed independently in textbooks. Class or group exercises in making such connections may be helpful in strengthening this skill.

Question 3

What was the intent of this question?

This question asked students to analyze ways in which religious reform in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries influenced the arts. Students were expected to show that they understood developments in the areas of both religious reform and the arts. Since the question called for analysis, it was important that students establish explicit linkage between religious reforms and artistic developments. The use of “the arts” in the phrasing of the prompt allowed students to discuss anything that might be considered part of the arts; they were not limited to the visual arts, but they were also not expected to cover the full range of the arts.

How well did students perform on this question?

The mean score was 2.57 out of a possible 9 points.

This was a straightforward question with clearly defined tasks on a mainstream topic. The concepts included in the question are covered in the most commonly used European history textbooks. Many students were able to construct effective responses to the prompt that were supported with specific

examples or trends in the arts. Some students, however, chose to concentrate on only one aspect of the prompt, and these essays scored in the lower range because they did not fully address the question. However, there were a number of solid essays, an indication that this was an accessible task for more able students. Even the best essays sometimes did not contain specific references to multiple works, but this was not deemed a significant error.

What were common student errors or omissions?

Students who did not perform well on this question often did not see the full range of the task specified in the prompt. For example, students wrote about what they knew about Renaissance art only; this was problematic because such discussions did not link to religious reform and focused on only a narrow portion of the time period given in the prompt. Similarly, some students saw this as a Protestant Reformation essay only, discussing events of the reformation movement without acknowledging any relevant linkage of religious ideas to the arts.

Another problem for some students was the construction of essays that made generalized comments about the arts (subject matter, for example) without discussing specific developments or linking comments to religious reform. Also, some students simply conveyed what they remembered about the arts without regard to the time period. These essays were deemed largely off task and typically scored at the bottom of the scoring range.

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 study of the arts remains an important topic for students of AP European History, though it is important that such study be contextualized in the larger historical picture. Typically, when art-related questions appear in the free-response section of the exam, students are asked to make a linkage between artistic developments and some other trend.

It is critical that students gain extensive practice and feedback on responding to the full range of a prompt as given. On this question it was not uncommon for students who provided specific and extended discussions of Renaissance art, for example, to score poorly because their essays were very limited in scope when the full range of the question was taken into account.

It is also important that teachers continue to work with students to gain a greater sense of chronology for major developments. Some students cited examples clearly outside the time period when trying to discuss developments in religion or the arts.

Question 4

What was the intent of this question?

This question required students to link government policies during both the French Revolution and the Napoleonic period to the development of national identity. To respond fully to the question, students needed to discuss at least two policies/linkages for each period.

How well did students perform on this question?

The mean score was 3.75 out of a possible 9 points. Almost all students knew something about this period of history, so scores reflected the degree to which they responded to the terms of the question.

What were common student errors or omissions?

Low-scoring essays were often purely narrative, providing a chronological account of major events of the Revolution. These responses did not demonstrate an understanding of the central task of the question. Other responses did not distinguish between government policies (which the question asked about) and events of the Revolution — many students talked about the storming of the Bastille or the march to Versailles rather than government policies. This was less of a problem with the Napoleonic period, when almost all students mentioned wars of conquest contributing to nationalism.

Many responses showed little understanding of the concept of national identity, and some mistook the task and attempted to formulate a description of French national character as defined by the events of the Revolution. Finally, many essays were unbalanced, offering only one example for the Revolutionary period and several for the Napoleonic period.

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?

Overall, problems mostly stemmed from weak analysis or a lack of understanding of how to link policies to national identity. Students had good information on the time period but did not know how to use their factual knowledge to answer the question. Teachers should stress the importance of carefully reading the question and focusing the response through a clearly written thesis that addresses all terms of the question.

Question 5

What was the intent of this question?

This question was intended to assess the extent to which students understand how the emergence of the middle class led to significant social changes, specifically in terms of gender roles and family structure. The question also assessed students' understanding of how economic developments such as the Industrial Revolution had significant and long-lasting impact on social conditions.

How well did students perform on this question?

The mean score was 2.6 out of a possible 9 points.

Many students demonstrated a thorough knowledge concerning the dynamic of social change in middle-class gender roles and family structure. They explored the idea of the cult of domesticity and the public and private spheres inhabited by males and females, respectively. Although a social history question of this kind can make it difficult to provide specific evidence, students did cite examples such as that of Queen Victoria as an exemplar of moral and respectable family life. They also cited such how-to books as *Mrs. Beeton's Everyday Cookery and Housekeeping Book*. Many students elaborated their ideas in a compelling fashion. For example, they did not just mention the cult of domesticity but discussed how it worked, what the mother's role was in it, and how it affected family life. Some students also showed an understanding of how developments in disparate areas of life, such as education, leisure, and social protest, could contribute to significant social change.

What were common student errors or omissions?

The most common error was to conflate social developments in the middle class with those in the working class, leading to dramatically false assertions and to many essays dealing entirely with the problems of industrialization. Another common error was to assert that the Industrial Revolution caused the emergence of the nuclear family. Current research demonstrates that the nuclear family emerged in western Europe

long before the Industrial Revolution. Most students did know that family size decreased during the 19th century, but they incorrectly concluded that this meant that the nuclear family formed at that time.

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?

For this question in particular, teachers need to give special attention to the issue of class in 19th-century western Europe. The common middle-class/working-class conflation found in the responses to this question may have derived from the particular class structure in the United States, where unionized factory workers have led lives that most would characterize as middle class. For that reason, teachers need to make a special effort to convey the chasm that existed between the middle and working classes in 19th-century Europe.

For social history questions in general, teachers need to supply students with as much specific evidence as possible so that they can make compelling claims in answering such questions. Working more social history issues into class assessments would also enable teachers to help students feel more comfortable with the particular requirements of social history questions.

In answering this question, many students showed the following deficiencies in their writing:

- Not reading the question clearly and keeping within its parameters. Writing whole paragraphs on the causes of the Industrial Revolution usually served to waste time that was needed to address fully what the question was actually asking.
- Not knowing what an effective thesis is. In the case of this question, a thesis needed to say something substantial about gender roles and family structure.
- Not looking for connections between issues. For example, do gender-role developments connect with or have an impact on changes in family structure and vice versa?

Question 6

What was the intent of this question?

This question was intended to measure students' knowledge of Nazi ideology and foreign policy and their ability to analyze connections between the two.

How well did students perform on this question?

The mean score was 3.37 out of a possible 9 points.

Almost every student knows something about Nazi Germany, its ideology, and its foreign policy, so students were able to produce a fair amount of relevant material. The best essays discussed several aspects of Nazi ideology and strongly linked them to foreign policy, producing multiple examples of specific foreign policy actions or initiatives.

What were common student errors or omissions?

Some students struggled to demonstrate linkages between ideology and foreign policy and wrote a bifurcated essay — one part describing Nazi ideology and the other Nazi foreign policy, with little or no linkage between the two halves. Other students struggled with balance and produced essays that expounded on either ideology or foreign policy, with little or no attention paid to the other. The weakest essays were often narratives about Hitler or the Holocaust, with little or no attention paid to the tasks set by the question.

Some students confined their essays to policies within Nazi Germany and neglected to discuss foreign policy. For example, students who wrote about anti-Semitic policies sometimes concentrated their attentions on events in the 1930s inside Germany (e.g., Nuremberg Laws, Kristallnacht) and did not discuss anything that happened outside of Germany, neglecting even to mention that the Holocaust involved people from many parts of Europe.

Other students wrote essays that spent too much time outside the confines of the question (1933–1945); for example, many essays discussed in detail the Treaty of Versailles and the restrictions placed on Germany. The provisions of the treaty could serve as a useful background, but students needed to use this information to discuss Nazi ideology and its effects on foreign policy; otherwise, what they produced was a discussion of 1919. In some such cases the students may have run out of time.

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?

Providing practice essay questions that require students to make connections between ideas and events helps students to develop a more nuanced view of history. AP Exam questions consistently ask for critical thinking — for students to analyze, compare, contrast — so the more practice students have in this area, the better prepared they will be.

Questions or class exercises that require students to produce specific pieces of evidence to support a statement will help them write essays that have more depth. Weaker essays build on generalities, whereas stronger essays have more information to support their assertions.

Giving students practice writing thesis statements will help them produce such statements on demand. It may not be feasible to write an essay in every class period, but having to write a thesis statement a few times a week would help students develop the organization and structured mindset needed to write cogently and successfully.

Question 7

What was the intent of this question?

This question dealt with one of the most fundamental developments of the 20th century: the changing relationship between Europe and the world. The question was intended to measure students' ability to trace causal links between developments in Europe and its colonies and the eventual independence of nearly all colonies by 1975.

How well did students perform on this question?

The mean score was 2.69 out of a possible 9 points.

A significant number of students demonstrated extensive knowledge and understanding of the process of decolonization during the period 1914–1975. Although the League of Nations mandate system established after the First World War was rarely mentioned, many students recalled the principle of self-determination announced as part of Woodrow Wilson's Fourteen Points and linked this concept to the aspirations of African and Asian elites. Even essays that described events rather than analyzed them often identified specific individuals who played significant roles in the process of decolonization. Gandhi and Ho Chi Minh were often mentioned. Students were most confident and specific when discussing nationalist uprisings in the colonies that led to the breakup of European empires. The bulk of the specific information seen in the essays dealt with Great Britain and France and their Asian colonies.

What were common student errors or omissions?

Students struggled to cover the entire time period identified in the prompt. Textbooks treat decolonization as a post-1945 phenomenon, and material relevant to the topic of decolonization for the period 1914–1945 is usually scattered (if it appears at all) over a number of chapters. Recalling such information at the conclusion of a three-hour examination is a serious challenge.

Many students struggled with periodization and displayed chronological confusion. Such essays usually referred to events clearly outside the time frame — the American and French Revolutions, the Latin American wars of independence, the Taiping Rebellion, and the Indian Uprising of 1857. The concept of analysis remains either misunderstood or ignored. Many essays provided accurate evidence but offered no analysis of the process of decolonization.

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?

Coverage of the entire time period (1450–present) remains a crucial task. Teachers might begin their courses with a brief overview of the post-1945 period, identifying the principal themes or trends and requiring students to organize group presentations on some of these trends. To minimize the possibility that students will then forget the information, teachers could include some test questions from the time period during the entire school year. Because the AP Exam is going to test students on content that spans five centuries, requiring that students review the information repeatedly and systematically should prove beneficial. Teachers may also have to devote greater time to time lines and similar exercises.

Teachers need to insist that students push beyond the descriptive phase of a problem and engage students in vigorous examination of the significance of the evidence. Requiring students to write frequently and providing critical feedback on those efforts is vital. Many students reveal an absence of familiarity with the demands of analytical essay writing. Teachers might consider spending more time in group exercises designed to familiarize students with the process of analytical writing. One possibility is to conduct class and small-group activities that present students with a past exam question and require them to formulate an appropriate thesis. The ability to think and write analytically is a skill that will serve students well long after they have departed from the classroom.