



## **Student Performance Q&A: 2007 AP<sup>®</sup> Psychology Free-Response Questions**

The following comments on the 2007 free-response questions for AP<sup>®</sup> Psychology were written by the Chief Reader, Jane Halonen of the University of West Florida in Pensacola. 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?***

This question was designed to test students' ability to apply basic concepts from across the various domains of knowledge covered in an introductory textbook; however, the greatest emphasis was on social psychology. The question used a scenario (joining a psychology club at school) as the context for the application.

#### ***How well did students perform on this question?***

Students performed well on this question. The mean score was 3.29 out of a possible 8 points, and the distribution was fairly normal.

#### ***What were common student errors or omissions?***

Although students were explicitly encouraged to apply rather than define terms, some lost credit for defining a term and then failing to apply it to the specific scenario as requested. Some relative weakness was also observed in applying the terms "circadian rhythm" and "Schachter two-factor theory" to the scenario. However, the Psychology Development Committee did strive to include easy, moderate, and difficult items to produce the right distribution. The two items with relatively weak student performance had been identified by the committee as the challenging ones.

***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 need to encourage students to read—and reread—the instructions to ensure that they actually perform at the level required by the exam. Most exam questions should elicit the higher levels of critical thinking delineated in B. S. Bloom’s *Taxonomy of Educational Objectives*, and occasionally students wander away from the cognitive task outlined in the question.

## **Question 2**

***What was the intent of this question?***

This question delved specifically into a controversial point that most teachers of introductory psychology treat comprehensively—the reality of schizophrenia as contrasted with lay information about the condition. The question explicitly asked students to articulate the difference between schizophrenia and dissociative identity disorder (DID), or “multiple personality” in lay terms. Clarifying the frequency and severity of schizophrenia is a primary goal of any introductory course, so the intent of this question was to allow students to exhibit depth of understanding rather than breadth across the course. Although the question concentrated specifically on abnormal psychology, it also tapped students’ knowledge of biology and treatment issues.

***How well did students perform on this question?***

The students did very well on this question. The mean score was 4.38 out of a possible 8 points, and the answers distributed fairly normally. Readers were impressed by student facility with the biological parameters of schizophrenia, which tended to be the harder aspect of the question. The scoring guidelines tried to take into account the broad ways that students would respond to this question, but the term “side effects” of medication in the “Risks” section was perhaps too openended. Ultimately, it was very difficult not to honor almost any side effect that was mentioned, because such a wide array of side effects are associated with psychoactive medication. This interpretive looseness probably contributed to a slightly higher mean than was expected.

***What were common student errors or omissions?***

Students did have difficulty in clearly distinguishing schizophrenia and DID, which was a primary driver for the design of the question. Some students had trouble with the biological aspects of the question.

***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 note and highlight the integrative nature of the exam questions, and their practice sessions with students should similarly strive to help them think across boundaries. Although the question was primarily about abnormal behavior, students had the opportunity to discuss neurobiological underpinnings of the illness. They should anticipate similar challenges in the future.