

Chief Reader Report on Student Responses: 2019 AP® Seminar Free-Response Questions

• Number of Student Responses Scored	43,441		
• Number of Readers	631		
• Score Distribution	Exam Score	N	%At
	5	3,077	7.1
	4	6,538	15.1
	3	25,605	58.9
	2	7,223	16.6
	1	998	2.3
• Global Mean	3.08		

The following comments on the 2019 free-response questions for AP® Seminar were written by the Chief Reader-Designate, Alice Hearst, of Smith College, Northampton, MA. 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.

End-of-Course Exam, Part A **Task:** Respond to 3 short answer questions **Topic:** Identify main idea and claims; evaluate use of evidence
Max. Points: 15 **Mean Score:** 9.78

What were the responses to this question expected to demonstrate?

This task assessed a student’s ability to read a general interest article and:

- Identify the article’s argument or thesis in its entirety (Q1);
- Identify the claims and/or line of reasoning contained in the argument as well as the connections among those claims (Q2); and
- Identify the evidence utilized by the author in support of the claims, assessing the relevance and credibility to that claim (Q3).

How well did the responses demonstrate the skills required on this question?

A critical first step in learning to write a well-reasoned argument is learning how to identify the argument in any piece of writing, looking at the logical construction of that argument, and evaluating the evidence an author uses to support and build that argument. The table below shows how students scored this year, compared to the previous three years, on each question in Part A of the End-of-Course Exam:

EOC Exam Part A Mean scores	2016	2017	2018	2019
Q1 (3 pts max)	2.1	2.34	2.03	1.86
Q2 (6 pts max)	4.8	4.22	4.13	4.11
Q3 (6 pts max)	4.5	3.52	4.01	3.8

What common student misconceptions or gaps in skills were seen in the responses to Q1, Identifying the Argument?

<i>Responses that Demonstrated Common Misconceptions/Gaps in Skills:</i>	<i>Responses that Demonstrated Understanding:</i>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Used a direct quote from the source as the main idea, often taken from the title • Identified only one or two components of the argument (e.g., “the voting age should be lowered to 17”) • Identified the main idea in vague terms (“voting matters”) • Confused claims developing the argument with the main idea • Misstated the main idea entirely 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Presented the argument in the student’s own words • Identified all three components of the main idea: 1) the voting age should be lowered to 17 to 2) help make voting habitual 3) which will make for a better democracy or better policy making • Incorporated details critical to the argument (e.g., “the voting age should be lowered to 17,” rather than “teenagers should vote”)

What common student misconceptions or gaps in skills were seen in understanding the line of reasoning and analyzing the argument, Q2?

<i>Responses that Demonstrated Common Misconceptions/Gaps in Skills:</i>	<i>Responses that Demonstrated Understanding:</i>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Misidentified claims, often confusing support for the claim with the claim itself (“cities that have allowed people under 18 to vote have seen higher turnouts”) • Asserted, without explanation, that claims were linked • Failed to explain how the claims connected to the main argument • Summarized the argument without identifying claims or line of reasoning 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Identified specific claims used to build the argument • Contextualized and explained the connections between claims • Explained how each claim was connected to the overall argument • Identified counterclaims raised and refuted by the author (“17 year olds have enough knowledge to vote responsibly”)

What common student misconceptions or gaps in skills were seen in responses to Q3, Evaluating Sources and Evidence?

<i>Responses that Demonstrated Common Misconceptions/Gaps in Skills:</i>	<i>Responses that Demonstrated Understanding:</i>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Referenced evidence generally without evaluating whether the evidence supported a particular claim • Evaluated the credibility of sources without assessing the actual evidence • Focused only on credentials of the source and/or professional affiliations (“this evidence came from Harvard”) • Simply labeled evidence as “credible” or “not credible” without explaining how the evidence supported or failed to support a claim 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Identified the evidence used to support a claim with particularity • Explained both the credibility and relevance of the specific piece of evidence • Assessed whether the evidence provided strong or weak support for a claim • Linked the evaluation of the evidence back to the author’s overall argument

Based on your experience at the AP® Reading with student responses, what advice would you offer teachers to help them improve student performance on Part A of the Exam?

- Help students practice identifying an argument, its claims/line of reasoning, and the evidence in *every* article, or other material they examine, as they learn to build their own arguments.
- Scaffold the construction of an argument, diagramming the main argument, claims, sub-claims and evidence.
- Introduce students to the general rules of argumentation, helping them to understand the different ways authors appeal to readers.
- Help students learn to put an author’s argument, claims and evidence into their own words so that they fully understand that argument.

- Remind students that complex arguments often have more than one component, not always expressly stated in the first paragraph.
- Practice looking at both claims and counterclaims, reminding students that a good argument will generally consider, and try to refute, counterclaims.
- Remind students to be explicit in explaining how specific pieces of evidence connect to the overall argument.
- Remind students that evaluating evidence goes beyond saying “John Smith is a professor at X University, so this is credible,” to evaluating the evidence itself in relation to the author’s main idea(s).
- Practice with students evaluating the strengths and weaknesses of evidence used to support a claim (in terms of sufficiency, rather than solely the credibility of the source).
- Remind students to write legibly as it is difficult to keep the student’s analysis in the forefront if the response is illegible.

What resources would you recommend to teachers to better prepare their students for the skills required on Part A?

- Work through the student samples on AP Central to model what high-scoring responses look like.
- Use the optional online modules for teachers (new Fall 2019) to help clarify and exemplify the requirements of the rubric.

End-of-Course Exam, Part B

Task: Read four short stimulus pieces, identifying a theme, and develop an argument, drawing support from at least two of those four sources

Topic: Synthesis Essay

Max. Points: 24

Mean Score: 16.95

What were the responses to this question expected to demonstrate?

This section of the exam assessed students' ability to:

- Read sources critically, understanding the different perspective contained in each source;
- Identify a theme or issue connecting the sources;
- Use the theme as the basis for developing a logically organized, well-reasoned argument presenting the student's perspective on that theme;
- Incorporate at least two of the sources to provide support for the student's argument;
- Build the argument with a clear line of reasoning or series of logical claims;
- Link claims to the supporting evidence;
- Cite sources appropriately (by name or letters A, B, C or D assigned in the prompt).

How well did the responses demonstrate the skills required for this question?

By the conclusion of this course, students should have learned how to read a variety of materials pertinent to a particular theme, evaluate and synthesize them, and then use them to develop their own arguments. The table below shows how students scored this year, compared to the previous three years, on Part B of the End-of-Course Exam:

EOC Exam Part B Mean scores	2016	2017	2018	2019
Max. 24 points	14.7	15.88	17.9	16.95

What common student misconceptions or gaps in skills were seen in response to EOC Exam, Part B?

<i>Responses that Demonstrated Common Misconceptions/Gaps in Skills:</i>	<i>Responses that Demonstrated Understanding:</i>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Demonstrated only a superficial reading or understanding of the sources provided • Failed to state a clear thesis or utilized a question (subsequently unanswered) as the thesis • Recognized a thematic connection among the sources without offering the student's own perspective ("All of the articles talk about waste.") • Relied on a cliché as a thesis ("Waste not, want not.") • Had a preconceived notion of an argument the student wanted to make that had very little or no connection to the sources provided 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Demonstrated a careful (often critical) reading of the sources, recognizing them as distinct voices in a complicated discussion • Took a position that was communicated clearly to the reader ("[c]limate change is an urgent problem that must be addressed at several levels") • Put the sources in dialogue with each other and with the student's voice. • Crafted a thoughtful, arguable thesis ("[w]e live in a consumer culture that encourages waste," or "[h]umans can learn about how to deal with 'waste' by looking at natural processes.")

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Articulated a thesis but failed to build an argument in support of that thesis • Ticked through the sources, summarizing each source but failing to connect them (“Source A said, source B said.”) • Failed to provide any commentary on the evidence used to support the student claim • Failed to link evidence to specific claims • Used sources in an irrelevant or superficial way, or, alternately, forced sources into the student’s argument, often illogically • Misunderstood one or more of the sources in its entirety, cherry picking statements indiscriminately • Neglected to outline their argument, resulting in confusing organization and/or lines of reasoning that simply failed • Did not revise or edit • Wrote in an inappropriate voice (colloquial, slang, overly academic) • Used source material without proper attribution (quotation marks, parentheses) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Allowed the source material to inspire the student’s own thinking on the issue • Created signposts and transitions to guide the reader through the argument, bringing the reader back to the central argument at critical points • Provided clear explanations of how the selected evidence supported the claims made • Interpreted evidence by exploring implications, limitations and/or objections to the statements made • Chose sources deliberately and utilized sections of text that clearly supported the student analysis, pairing the materials appropriately (“[s]ources A and D remind us that we can look to nature to provide solutions to contemporary problems,” or “[s]ources B and D suggest that there are innovative ways to solved complex environmental issues”) • Demonstrated clear organization of the argument (indicating that appropriate planning and outlining was done first) • Wrote in an academic voice, using correct grammar • Skillfully attributed and embedded source materials
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Based on your experience at the AP Reading with student responses, what advice would you offer to teachers to help them improve student performance on this section of the exam?

- Remind students to read the task directions for EOC Exam Part B, which ask students to “read carefully ... focusing on a theme,” so that they can explore the theme in their first paragraph: they should read, annotate and think about a theme that connects the sources, not take the reader through the argument of each individual source in several paragraphs. For example, “[a] common theme suggested by the sources is X. Source A addressed that issue from the perspective of Y, while Source B took up the theme by talking about Z. These sources suggest that we can change our consumerist habits without wholly sacrificing our quality of life.”
- Help students learn how to get two (or more) sources “talking” to one another, so that they can insert their own voice into that dialogue by “writ[ing] a logically organized, well-reasoned and well-written argument that presents [their] own perspective on a theme or issue.”
- With an argument in mind, help students to learn to choose materials from “at least two” sources that will support or argue with their own perspective; for example “[w]hile Source C argues X, Y and Z, that position may go too far.”
- Remind students that writing a response with their own perspective does not mean they can choose an unrelated issue (such as test anxiety in some countries and Thanos as a hero) and try to shoehorn the sources into that argument.
- Provide students with multiple opportunities to enter into conversations that synthesize different perspectives, different sources, different genres, different time periods. This could be facilitated by beginning with small student groups to argue the pro and con on an issue and then increase the difficulty by asking them to look at more complicated texts.

- Design projects that ask students to write commentary on sources as they begin to read as producers rather than passive consumers of knowledge.
- Teach students to acknowledge and address weaknesses and strengths in their arguments, as well as limitations to those arguments.
- Ask students to think carefully about which of the TWO sources provide best fit their argument, rather than trying to twist a source just to get an additional source cited.
- Help students to understand how authors used evidence themselves: students need to properly attribute sources cited *within* the sources provided (“[s]ource A cites a study by X that argues ... for Y”).
- Teach students to make transitions as they move from point to point in the argument, to signal to the reader where the argument is headed.
- Encourage students to *organize* their answers before they begin writing and to proofread once they are done—90 minutes should give them ample time to do this.
- Remind students to write legibly.

What resources would you recommend to teachers to better prepare their students for the skills required on Part B?

- Work through the student samples on AP Central to model what high scoring responses look like.
- Use the optional online modules for teachers (new Fall 2019) to help clarify and exemplify the requirements of the rubric.

Individual Research Report **Task:** Select an area/problem to research, read a variety of sources and write a research note that evaluates those materials **Topic:** Individual contribution to a Team Project

Maximum Points: 30 **Mean Score:** 21.35

What were the responses to this task expected to demonstrate?

This task assessed the student’s ability:

- To investigate a particular approach or range of perspectives on a research topic selected by a student team;
- To conduct scholarly research relevant to the topic;
- To produce an evaluative, analytic report on the research conducted, analyzing the reasoning within the texts reviewed and the relevance and credibility of the evidence utilized in those texts.

How well did the responses demonstrate the skills required for this task?

The table below shows how students scored this year, compared to the previous three years, on the Individual Research Report.

Individual Research Report Mean scores	2016	2017	2018	2019
Max. 30 points	20.9	20.84	19.93	21.35

What common student misconceptions or gaps in skills were seen in the Individual Research Report?

<i>Responses that Demonstrated Common Misconceptions/Gaps in Skills:</i>	<i>Responses that Demonstrated Understanding:</i>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Conducted insufficient or superficial research • Lost focus on reporting on the research sources, veering into independent arguments • Utilized materials with no references to research • Chose a topic too broad (or too narrow) to achieve research depth • Failed to place the issue in context and explain why the issue matters • Relied too heavily on general web sites to the neglect of peer-reviewed and other academic sources 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Used a variety of credible and well-vetted sources, including peer-reviewed journals and other academic sources • Concisely evaluated the research on the specific topic in a way that reflected the student’s grasp of the research • Anchored the commentary in sources and evaluated the evidence • Chose a topic that was narrow enough that the research was focused and manageable • Provided a clear description of why the topic was important

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Relied excessively on quoting information from sources without commenting on the argument or evidence used in that source, reflecting limited student understanding of the material • Failed to distinguish between the student’s commentary and commentary from a source • Inadequately attributed material overall or failed to signal paraphrases • Evaluated evidence superficially without considering the source • Treated all sources as equal in quality and relevance • Failed to synthesize or organize the research • Moved from one source to another with inadequate commentary • Neglected to link in-text citations to bibliography • Neglected to proofread bibliography for required elements • Relied heavily on URLs as citations • Lacked an academic or scholarly tone, or, alternately, utilized dense information from sources without “unpacking” that language • Failed to proofread for grammar, spelling and tone • Exceeded word count 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Selected sources that indicated a solid awareness of the scholarly discourse surrounding the topic • Included a title that indicated the precise focus of the investigation • Demonstrated a clear comprehension of the arguments from the sources, allowing insightful evaluative commentary • Signaled to the reader the source of the information quoted, paraphrased or otherwise mentioned • Appropriately attributed all sources referenced • Used information purposefully with attributive tags, bolstering credibility and relevance • Discussed connections among sources in a logical, insightful fashion • Organized research logically • Synthesized research from various sources • Articulated explicit connections among the sources • Made certain that bibliographic sources matched in-text citations and vice versa • Provided all citation elements in the bibliography in a consistent fashion • Used a writing voice that was both academic and able to articulate complex ideas • Proofread to eliminate errors of grammar and syntax • Edited for word count
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Based on your experience of student responses at the AP Reading, what advice would you offer to teachers to help them improve student performance in the IRR?

- Help students become comfortable using peer-reviewed and other academic sources, and help them understand what kinds of source materials are insufficient to support their research analysis.
- Teach students to evaluate the sources used *within* the research reviewed to evaluate the quality of the research.
- Have students practice reading materials from academic sources and analyze academic conventions.
- Have students work on developing titles/headings/subheadings that signal to the reader what the research report is about.
- Urge students to use citations as soon as they begin to write and explain why citation is important to establish their own credibility.
- Help students distinguish between reporting on research by summarizing research findings and inserting commentary on that research.

- Practice writing direct, specific commentary on short academic articles, building up through comparing and contrasting two perspectives and finally to synthesizing the research.
- Teach students how to translate complex research findings into materials, language and concepts that they can understand and communicate to others.
- Ask students to read their papers aloud to each other in pairs, to check for voice and understandability.
- Hold the line on word counts.
- Take advantage of peer-review at multiple points during the research process.
- Review the rubric from time to time to remind students how their work will be evaluated.
- Remind students to double check their submissions before finalizing to ensure that they have uploaded the correct documents and removed identifying information (may be best to do this simultaneously as a class).

What resources would you recommend to teachers to better prepare their students for the skills required on IRR?

- Work through the student samples on AP Central to model what high scoring responses look like.
- Use the optional online modules for teachers to help clarify and exemplify the requirements of the rubric.

Individual Written Argument**Task:** Write a 2000-word, evidence-based argument**Topic:** Research and Synthesis**Max. Points:** 48**Mean Score:** 26.0**What were the responses to this task expected to demonstrate?**

This task assessed the students' ability to:

- Review a packet of stimulus materials and determine a theme linking at least two of the sources
- Formulate a research question directly related to that theme;
- Conduct research and locate credible and scholarly materials relevant to answering the research question;
- Formulate a well-reasoned argument with a clear line of reasoning and a plausible conclusion;
- Evaluate counterarguments or other perspectives in the process of developing arguments; and
- Write a 2,000-word argument with claims that are logically organized and supported by credible, scholarly evidence.

How well did the responses demonstrate the skills required for this task?

Individual Written-Argument Mean scores	2016	2017	2018	2019
Max. 42 points (2016)	27.7 (out of 42)	31.53	28.44	26.0
Max. 48 points (2017 onwards)				

What common student misconceptions or gaps in skills were seen in the Individual Written Argument?

<i>Responses that Demonstrated Common Misconceptions/Gaps in Skills:</i>	<i>Responses that Demonstrated Understanding:</i>
<i>Choice of Topic</i>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Used recycled or repurposed papers crafted for other courses, assignments, or practice IWAs, sometimes using stimulus materials and themes from a prior year's Individual Written Argument prompt • Adopted an argument already presented in one of the stimulus sources or failed to identify a theme that connected at least two sources 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Developed research questions making it clear that the student had engaged with the 2019 stimulus materials and allowing the documents to inspire authentic curiosity • Discovered themes that were clearly rooted in at least two texts from the stimulus document collection, which included some outside of the large, overarching theme of change and transformation
<i>Use of Stimulus Materials</i>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Failed to identify a theme that connected at least two sources, often choosing just one topic from one source or presenting information about a completely unrelated field 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Chose an area of inquiry that was thematically rooted in two or more documents in the stimulus packet • Integrated the details from the materials in the stimulus packet, being explicit about the relevance of that material to the argument

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Utilized stimulus materials as contrived jumping-off points, mentioned those materials only cursorily or in discussions that did not connect the materials to the argument Omitted stimulus material altogether Used a stimulus source for a definition or fact that could be obtained from other, more relevant sources Misinterpreted or misrepresented the content or context of a stimulus source 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Contextualized the stimulus document to accurately represent the source in its argument Positioned evidence from a stimulus document in conversation with evidence from another source
<i>Development of Area of Inquiry and Research Question</i>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Provided broad research questions or theses which resulted in oversimplification of perspectives, claims, and conclusions Failed to situate the research topic in a particular time or place 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Chose an area of inquiry, typically situated in time and place, that was narrow enough to allow for the complete exploration of well-defined perspectives Made clear the research question and/or thesis so that the reader did not have to infer its inquiry and/or position Provided specific and relevant details (i.e., who is affected, when/where the issue is happening--to convey why the research is important)
<i>Evaluation of Multiple Perspectives</i>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Lacked opposing, competing, or alternative perspectives Made only general comparisons between perspectives, such as an acknowledgement of agreement or disagreement Conflated lenses and perspectives, resulting in the oversimplification of complex vantage points Chose lenses or perspectives which were inappropriate for the subject matter Mentioned or wholly dismissed alternate views, without exploring them fully Attempted to convey an entire tapestry of perspectives by reducing it to one source or voice 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Explored the spectrum of relevant perspectives to reveal the complexity of an issue Elaborated on the connections between perspectives through an evaluation of implications and limitations Discerned the difference between a lens (a filter through which to consider a topic or issue) and a perspective (a point of view conveyed through an argument) Explored alternate views fully by engaging with their evidence and reasoning

<i>Development of Line of Reasoning</i>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lacked commentary to establish argument or make meaningful evaluations of or connections with evidence • Provided commentary which only summarized the preceding quotes • Wrote in expository or narrative modes • Allowed a collection of evidence to imply an argument, which was left to the reader to discern • Lacked a clear argument or made conclusions that merely summarize major points or failed to align with the research question • Developed a weak line of reasoning with minimal or illogical connections between claims • Obscured the line of reasoning through formatting choices, such as a lack of paragraph breaks or poorly chosen subtitles 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Demonstrated the links between evidence and claims by providing commentary that engages with the details presented in the evidence • Took a clearly-articulated position as conveyed through an argument • Presented a clear line of reasoning through an explanation of links between claims, with a strong student voice driving the paper • Used formatting to further communicate the argument, such as paragraph breaks and purposeful subtitles
<i>Selection and Use of Evidence</i>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Selected evidence from primarily journalistic or popular sources, including random blogs • Treated all evidence as equal in relevance or credibility without presenting commentary that could justify the use of less academic sources • Overly relied on one source 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Used a variety of well-vetted sources, including peer-reviewed journals and academic sources • Provided commentary to explain the relevance and credibility of evidence when it was not initially apparent • Selected relevant evidence that fully supported the claims
<i>Application of Citation Conventions</i>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Attributed source material in-text without an accompanying bibliographic entry • Included a preponderance of sources not found in-text, without referring to the bibliography as a “Works Consulted” page • Required reader input to make links between in-text citations and bibliographic entries (for example, using a title in a parenthetical citation and beginning an entry with an author’s last name) • Provided citations with missing elements that had to be guessed from a URL 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ensured that all sources (including the stimulus sources) were listed in the bibliography and matched attributions in the body of the IWA • Applied an academically accepted citation style, including all essential elements, consistently

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Failed to include all essential elements (i.e., author/organization, title, publication, and date, across bibliographic entries) 	
<i>Application of Grammar and Style Conventions</i>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Presented information with a colloquial or casual voice, or alternately, a dense voice that rendered the paper incoherent Obscured complex ideas through the selection of vague words and/or the use of overly cumbersome syntactical choices 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Maintained an academic and stylistically appropriate tone Employed varied syntax and precise word choice, mostly free of spelling or grammatical errors, to enhance communication of complex ideas

Based on your experience of student responses at the AP Reading, what advice would you offer to teachers to help them improve student performance in the IWA?

- Practice reading college level sources and identifying themes.
- Talk explicitly about how to integrate stimulus materials into an argument.
- Use college level materials to allow students to understand what scholarly materials look like, and practice identifying the main points and lines of argument in those materials, both in small groups and in the class as a whole.
- Teach students the importance of the “So What” question so they learn to contextualize source materials.
- Practice writing commentary about how various articles link claims and evidence.
- Spend time working with students to develop focused research questions that allow them to make an argument.
- Remind students that they did a research report earlier in the class and explain how an argument is distinct from an evaluative report, as well as what characteristics the two types of writing might share.
- Talk to students about what writing in an academic voice entails.
- Remind students that their research *question* drives the research.
- Remind students to double-check the documents they have uploaded to the Digital Portfolio.
- Encourage students to form groups for peer review and use editing tools provided by the instructor earlier in the course to inform their input.

What resources would you recommend to teachers to better prepare their students for the skills required on IWA?

- Work through the student samples on AP Central to model what high-scoring responses look like.
- Use resources on the teacher community that provide effective ways of getting students to work with the stimulus materials.
- Use the optional online module for teachers to help clarify and exemplify the requirements of the rubric.