

Chief Reader Report on Student Responses:

2020 AP[®] Seminar Free-Response Questions

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|--------------------------------------|-------|------------|--------|------|
| • Number of Student Responses Scored | 52562 | | | |
| • Number of Readers | 770 | | | |
| • Score Distribution | | Exam Score | N | %At |
| | | 5 | 3,370 | 6.4 |
| | | 4 | 7,634 | 14.5 |
| | | 3 | 31,427 | 59.8 |
| | | 2 | 8,959 | 17.0 |
| | | 1 | 1,172 | 2.2 |
| • Global Mean | 3.06 | | | |

The following comments on the 2020 free-response questions for AP[®] Seminar were written by the Chief Reader, 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.

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

Maximum Points: 30 **Mean Score:** 21.14

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.
- Conduct scholarly research relevant to the topic.
- 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 | 2020 |
|--|------|-------|-------|-------|-------|
| Max. 30 points | 20.9 | 20.84 | 19.93 | 21.35 | 21.14 |

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

The most successful responses had a narrow focus, used a variety of credible and well-vetted sources, and anchored all evidence and analysis in those sources, while less successful responses reflected vague topics, did insufficient or superficial research, lost focus and often failed to provide the reader with reference to sources.

| <i>Responses that Demonstrated Common Misconceptions/Gaps in Skills:</i> | <i>Responses that Demonstrated Understanding:</i> |
|---|--|
| <i>Context (Row 1)</i> | |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Neglected to narrow the topic to achieve research depth or utilize a title that signaled a precise topic. • Neglected to indicate why the subject was important. • Relied heavily on general websites, used few or no academic sources. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Narrowed the topic to allow focused, manageable research, with a clear and concise title. • Provided a clear explanation of the importance of the subject. • Selected sources indicating full awareness of the scholarly discourse around the topic. |

| <i>Analysis of Arguments (Row 2)</i> | |
|--|--|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Relied excessively on quoting or paraphrasing information without commentary on either the argument or the evidence. • Failed to differentiate clearly between commentary on a source and the source itself (attribution often faulty). | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Understood arguments in the selected sources and provided insightful evaluative commentary. • Provided clear attribution to allow reader to differentiate between the argument used in a source and commentary upon that argument. |
| <i>Evaluation of Credibility and Relevance of Evidence (Row 3)</i> | |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Evaluated evidence, but not the source of the evidence. • Treated all sources as equal in quality and relevance. • Assumed credibility or relevance of evidence without adequate analysis. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Discussed both the relevance and credibility of the evidence used by sources, including attributive tags that reflected a clear understanding value of the evidence. |
| <i>Synthesized Perspectives (Row 4)</i> | |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Failed to put the sources in dialogue with each other and organize the research. • Failed to articulate connections among sources, simply moving from one source to the next. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Discussed connections among the sources in a logical and insightful way, creating a coherent narrative of the research literature as a whole. • Organized the research precisely. • Put the sources in dialogue with each other. |
| <i>Citation and Attribution (Row 5)</i> | |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Failed to signal where materials were paraphrased, using proper attributive tags. • Neglected to properly utilize in text citation and/or link it to bibliography. • Neglected to proofread bibliographies for required elements. • Confused databases with sources and/or relied heavily on URLs as citations. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Appropriately attributed all sources in text. • Ensured that sources listed in bibliography and in text citations matched. • Made certain that required elements for each bibliographical source were included. |

Grammar and Style (Row 6)

- Used either overly simplistic or overly dense language that reflected a lack of understanding of the materials.
- Used appropriate grammar but not precise enough to convey complex ideas.
- Neglected to proofread for grammar, spelling and tone.
- Exceeded word count.

- Utilized appropriate word choice and sentence structure to articulate complex ideas.
- Maintained an academic tone.
- Used language largely free of spelling and grammatical errors.
- Edited for word count.

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, discussing what kinds of source materials are best to use when compiling research report and allowing them to become familiar with academic conventions.
- Help students understand how to comment on a source's research or reasoning.
- Give students the opportunity to practice writing summaries of data or information, arguments, and analysis.
- Teach students how to use commentaries to build their own argument or analysis.
- Ensure that students realize that a database, such as EBSCO, directs them to sources and should not be cited as the source of information. Rather, students should provide the journal or book title and other essential information needed to evaluate the source.
- Teach students to evaluate the sources used *within* the research they are reviewing, as well as in the bibliographies, to evaluate the quality of the research.
- Teach students to use titles/headings/subheadings that signal what the research report is about and helps them bring more focus and specificity to their writing.
- Urge students to insert citations as soon as they begin to write so they don't have to backtrack later; 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.
- Have students 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. If a sentence or paragraph sounds awkward, or the listener can't understand what the sentence or paragraph means, work together to improve the writing.
- Hold the line on word counts.
- 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 document 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 scoring guidelines.

Individual Written Argument**Task:** Write a 2000-word, evidence-based argument**Topic:** Research and Synthesis**Max. Points:** 48**Mean Score:** 29.12**What were the responses to this task expected to demonstrate?**

This task assessed 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.
- 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 | 2020 |
|--|------------------|-------|-------|------|-------|
| Max. 42 points (2016) Max. 48 points (2017 onwards) | 27.7 (out of 42) | 31.53 | 28.44 | 26.0 | 29.12 |

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

The most successful papers turned on a clearly focused research question that drew from at least two of the stimulus materials, assembled a variety of research materials, and analyzed those materials while building the student's own argument. Less successful papers often articulated a broad topic rather than posing a specific research question, were sometimes only marginally connected to a theme derived from the stimulus materials, reflected limited research that was not fully analyzed or evaluated, and failed to sustain an argument throughout.

| <i>Responses that Demonstrated Common Misconceptions/Gaps in Skills:</i> | <i>Responses that Demonstrated Understanding:</i> |
|---|--|
| <i>Understand and Analyze Context (Stimulus Materials) (Row 1)</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 IWA prompt. • Adopted an argument already presented in one of the stimulus sources or failed to identify a theme that connected at least two sources. • Wrote off-topic responses using only one sentence or one word from a stimulus source (in 2020, "happiness"). | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Generated research questions clearly inspired by a theme connecting at least two stimulus sources, even if they departed from the most commonly identified themes, (emotional well-being and happiness). • Interpreted stimulus material accurately, reflecting a careful consideration of the topic. • Incorporated the stimulus materials in a meaningful way in the body of the paper to bolster argument or present a counterargument. |

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| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Misinterpreted stimulus materials. • Used stimulus materials to provide facts or definitions that could have come from more relevant sources. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Placed the stimulus materials in conversation with other sources consulted. |
| <i>Understand and Analyze Context (Row 2)</i> | |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Treated the topic or research question as self-evidently important, without providing details that justified academic inquiry. • Chose a topic that allowed the student to simply present an opinion without being informed by research. • Provided specific details for only part of the question/thesis or presented irrelevant details. • Provided such a broad question or thesis that the claims were necessarily oversimplified and not tied to a time or place. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provided specific commentary about why the research or topic deserved analysis and communicated the urgency and importance of the question, placing it in time and in place. • Provided specific details important for understanding all aspects of the research question. • Demonstrated a depth of understanding about how and where the line of inquiry fits into the topic. |
| <i>Understand and Analyze Perspective (Row 3)</i> | |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Included only one perspective without acknowledging or explaining competing or alternative perspectives. • Made only general comparisons between perspectives, such as an acknowledgement of agreement or disagreement. • Chose perspectives arbitrarily, without explaining how those perspectives intersected. • Chose perspectives that were inappropriate for the subject matter. • 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, and fully explored alternate views. • Elaborated on the connections between perspectives through an evaluation of implications and limitations. • Included multiple perspectives in conversation, situating them in paragraphs together and using the evidence from various perspectives as responses to each other. |

| <i>Establish Argument (Row 4)</i> | |
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| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Co-opted a cliched argument from a source (e.g., money can't buy happiness). • Allowed evidence to dominate the response and imply an argument rather than framing an argument drawing upon the evidence. • Crafted a thesis that generated a report rather than an argument. • Provided commentary which only summarized quotes from other sources, failed to align with the research question or stated obvious conclusions. • Relied upon contrived signposts to suggest organization but which failed to guide the reader through a line of argument. • Developed a weak line of reasoning with minimal or illogical connections between claims. • Failed to use paragraphs, headings or other formatting measures to guide the reader through the argument. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Posed a research question that required an argument in response. • Developed a meaningful line of inquiry that expanded into a logical, convincing argument; student's voice drove the analysis. • Demonstrated the links between evidence and claims by providing commentary that engaged with details drawn from the evidence. • Selected evidence that fully supported the claims. • Provided details sufficient to convince the reader of the plausibility of the conclusion. • Used formatting to further communicate the argument, such as paragraph breaks and purposeful subtitles. |
| <i>Select and Use Evidence (Row 5)</i> | |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Relied primarily upon journalistic or popular sources, including random blogs, often confusing academic journals with less scholarly sources. • Consulted sources the student did not understand, summarized sources, or demonstrated only a superficial reading of the sources. • Assumed that any source listed in EBSCO is scholarly. • Treated all evidence as equal in relevance or credibility without presenting commentary that could justify the use of less-academic sources. • Relied too heavily on a single source. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Used a variety of well-vetted sources, including peer-reviewed journals and academic sources. • Demonstrated a careful (often critical) reading of the sources, recognizing them as distinct voices in a complicated discussion. • Provided commentary to explain the relevance and credibility of evidence when it was not initially apparent. • Used academic sources with specificity and clarity, noting study methodologies and other relevant details. |

Apply Conventions (Citation) (Row 6)

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| <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Attributed source material in-text without an accompanying bibliographic entry.• Used source material without quotation marks, introductions or parenthetical citations.• Utilized non-standard or inconsistent citation styles.• Required reader to guess at 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.• Failed to include all essential elements (i.e., author/organization, title, publication, and date, across bibliographic entries). | <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Included reference page citations for all cited works.• Embedded quoted material appropriately.• 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. |
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Apply Conventions (Grammar and Style) (Row 7)

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| <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Wrote in an expository, narrative, overly casual or overly dense style, obscuring the argument.• Did not revise or edit and paid little attention to word choice and sentence structure.• Wrote in absolutes and generalizations.• Omitted transitions.• Utilized rhetorical questions to vary syntax.• Included first - and second- person voices, used contractions and/or were redundant, detracting from an academic voice. | <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Maintained an academic and stylistically appropriate tone with writing largely free of spelling or grammatical errors.• Demonstrated control of language by manipulating syntax to convey meaning.• Adopted terminology appropriate for the topic. |
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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 IWA?

- Teach students how to use the stimulus materials in ways that will help build their argument.
- Teach students how to establish context for their research question.
- Teach students to align their thesis statements and topic sentences with their research questions.
- Help students learn to recognize a focused research question that is narrow but still flexible enough to develop an argument with multiple perspectives.
- Explore different styles of argumentation with students. Not all arguments lend themselves to a problem/solution format, and a contrived solution tacked on to a solid argument can undercut that argument.
- Provide students with the opportunity to practice placing perspectives in conversation with one another.

- Use mock performance tasks to:
 - Model the identification of themes among college level materials.
 - Model the integration of the stimulus materials into the student argument.
 - Introduce students to college-level material to develop an understanding of what scholarship looks like.
 - Practice identifying the main idea/line of argument in scholarly materials.
 - Practice writing focused research questions that explore a contested topic and answer a “so what?” question.
 - Explain the distinction between research reports and arguments.
 - Practice citation styles.
 - Understand what an academic tone is.
- Practice writing commentary about how various articles link claims and evidence.
- Help students learn to move between ideas within and between paragraphs while avoiding canned transitional words and phrases.
- Remind students that their research *question* drives the research.
- Encourage students to work together doing peer review.
- Remind students to double-check the documents they have uploaded to the Digital Portfolio.

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 scoring guidelines and review updated Scoring Notes for the IWA.