



Student Performance Q&A: 2015 AP[®] United States History Free-Response Questions

The following comments on the 2015 free-response questions for AP[®] US History were written by the Chief Reader, Jonathan Chu of the University of Massachusetts Boston. 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.

Short Answer Question 1

What was the intent of this question?

Short Answer Question 1 allowed students to examine the similarities and differences between the Chesapeake and New England regions in colonial America. The question assessed the historical thinking skill of comparison, and the content covered Period 2, which ranges from 1607 to 1754. Students were asked to explain one similarity (task A) and one difference (task B) between the two colonial regions, then provide a factor which accounted for the difference (task C) identified in task B.

How well did students perform on this question?

The mean score on Short Answer Question 1 was 1.16 out of a possible 3 points.

This was a mainstream question, and a topic all survey United States History classes cover, but it is content covered in the beginning of the course. This could have been the cause of some of the generic answers given in the student responses. Most students knew something about the question, and it was easier for students to come up with a difference than with a similarity. Students often mixed the second and third tasks (i.e., the difference, then the factor that accounted for the difference), so the readers were required to parse out the differences between the two. In general, this question was probably more difficult than it initially appeared because of the specificity and explanation that was required for each of the tasks. Students tended to provide general and generic characteristics but often failed to explain or give specific details.

What were common student errors or omissions?

The most common problem with the student responses was not providing enough specific details to earn the point for either a similarity or difference. Students were able to offer general and broad characteristics (e.g., “both groups of colonists came over for new opportunities;” or “both groups had conflicts with Native Americans”) but unfortunately many responses did not provide enough specific details or provide an

explanation to earn the point. Another common error with student responses was confusing the Chesapeake and New England (e.g., “New England relied on cash crops whereas the Chesapeake relied on shipping and trade”), or combining both regions incorrectly for a similarity (e.g., “in both regions colonists left England for religious reasons”).

Students need to be mindful of the time period 1607 to 1754 and make sure not to make generalities that do not apply for the entire time period. Examples included responses that said colonists in New England were more aggressive and harsh with Native Americans than colonists in the Chesapeake or including information outside the time period (e.g., “Britain ruled the New England colonies with more authority after the French and Indian War than the Chesapeake colonies.”).

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 most difficult part of scoring this question was establishing the threshold for awarding a point. In other words, when did the student response provide enough specificity or offer a strong enough explanation to warrant a point? We often found ourselves saying, “if the student just provided a specific detail here there would be no question in our mind to award a point.” Using proper nouns can help by adding that layer of specificity that most of these short-answer questions are looking for.

The keys to being successful on the short-answer questions are being precise and concise. Students often rambled on, as if they were answering an essay prompt, most of which was unnecessary. Teachers could practice these with only allowing students the option of using three sentences per task. It was not unusual for answers to earn the point in only one, well crafted, sentence. Adding length rarely helped the student clarify their point; in fact, it often made things more problematic for the reader.

Labeling was also helpful for the readers, as it helped them to quickly identify the point the student was making. This is not a requirement and when a student did not label their responses the readers were required to parse out the different tasks. Occasionally a student would answer and have it labeled incorrectly; this was not an issue, as the readers were instructed to find the correct response wherever the student wrote it, regardless of where they labeled it.

Just like with anything, practice makes perfect. Teachers could use short-answer questions as daily warm-up writing activities, have a few students share their responses, and then give verbal feedback to the class.

Short Answer Question 2

What was the intent of this question?

Short Answer Question 2 allowed students to compare excerpted quotes from John Muir and Theodore Roosevelt concerning the best use of natural resources. The question assessed the historical thinking skill of contextualization and covered Periods 6 and 7, which range from 1865 to 1945. The question asked for brief statements explaining implications of Muir’s conservationist policy outlook (task A) and how Roosevelt’s preservationist policy outlook had implications that contrasted with those of Muir’s (task B). Additionally, the question asked for a specific example of land use in the time period 1890–1945 that might represent one of the excerpted viewpoints (task C).

How well did students perform on this question?

The mean score on Short Answer Question 2 was 1.68 out of a possible 3 points.

Most students performed across a normal range of good and bad. That is, readers encountered packets where all responses scored a zero, then other regions where all responses scored a 3. Because of the environmental/Yosemite Park content of the correct responses, students from California did very well.

What were common student errors or omissions?

Key errors included misinterpreting Muir as somehow believing nature was ugly or underexploited; switching the actual policy outlooks of Muir and Roosevelt; offering responses in task c that were out of the time period (such as Rachel Carson’s *Silent Spring*, the Environmental Protection Agency or the Clean Air Act); assuming that Roosevelt “invented” Yosemite and Yellowstone parks; and confusing land-use policy with social movements such as immigration. A challenge for readers was student conflation of Theodore Roosevelt with Franklin Delano Roosevelt and the Civilian Conservation Corps. A common detraction from quality responses was sarcastic lampooning of Muir as a tree-hugger, nature freak, etc., or glib summation such as: “the Grand Canyon is just a hole full of dirt;” or “Just don’t mess with Nature.”

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 must use a dark pen that works — handwriting remains an issue. Slang, sarcasm, street language, and flippant responses such as “Teddy and Johnny got together” don’t typically earn points. The biggest issue is knowing which facts fit into the time period indicated, and not going outside of the era requested: in short, following directions. For this new exercise — the short-answer questions — students often responded as if it were a multiple-choice OR long essay, so familiarizing them with what a short-answer question means is imperative. For example, no thesis is needed. Finally, as so many students referred to “Roosevelt” without clarifying which one, full names of presidents would be helpful.

Short Answer Question 3

What was the intent of this question?

Short Answer Question 3 allowed students to compare two excerpts written by John Adams and Benjamin Rush, prominent figures from chronological period 3 (1754 to 1800). The question assessed the historical thinking skill of interpretation. Referring to the excerpts, the question asked students to explain a significant difference between Adams’ and Rush’s understanding of the American Revolution (task A) and then to explain how examples of an historical event or development in the period from 1760 to 1800 could be used to support each interpretation (tasks B and C).

How well did students perform on this question?

The mean score on Short Answer Question 3 was 1.42 out of a possible 3 points.

Students generally performed well on this question as they displayed a familiarity, if not fluency, with the American Revolution. Describing a significant difference between the two historical interpretations proved the most difficult task of the three required by the question. Too many students in task (A) reiterated the chronology in the excerpts as the difference, e.g., Adams ended the revolution in 1775 but Rush began it with the war and extended it after the war’s end. Most students provided appropriate examples and an explanation of an historical event or development for tasks (B) and (C). A fair number of students in explaining the event/development analyzed the difference in the views and thus earned the point for (A) while addressing (B) and (C).

What were common student errors or omissions?

Essays quoted from the excerpts in the hope that juxtaposing quotations satisfied the requirements for describing the difference between the views.

Students presented evidence outside of the time range particularly for (C) in which responses often ranged into the nineteenth and even twentieth centuries. Manifest Destiny and the Civil War appeared often in (C).

The excerpts clearly distinguished the causes of American Revolution from consequences the Revolutionary War. Students who misunderstood that distinction struggled, especially with the interpretation of Adams.

A frequent error was the inaccurate identification of the Declaration of Independence as either beginning the war or ending it.

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 already discourage quotation and encourage interpretation of the documents in DBQ preparation. Teachers should apply the same energy and strategies to short-answer questions with excerpts. Stress to students that restatement of the question or excerpt does not constitute a response that will earn the point.

Point out to students that lists of events or developments require explanations to accompany them.

Emphasize that students should address directly each question part rather than cascade paragraphs that eventually spill over the task required.

Model short-answer question responses and give students practice not only writing responses but scoring them. In scoring, students will see the advantage to finding the tasks completed in sequence. Such an exercise may convince the students that they earn credit for what know when they respond discretely to each question part rather than in a "treasure hunt" of prose.

Short Answer Question 4

What was the intent of this question?

Short Answer Question 4 allowed students to explain which era best marked the beginning of industrialization in the U.S. (task A): the market revolution in the first half of the 1800s, the Civil War era in the middle of the 1800s, or the rise of big business in the second half of the 1800s. The question assessed the historical thinking skill of periodization and covered Periods 4, 5, and 6, which range from 1800 to 1898. The students had to provide a specific historical example (task B) that supported their explanation in task A. The question also asked students to provide specific historical evidence that explained why one of the other periods was less convincing as the start of industrialization in the U.S.

How well did students perform on this question?

The mean score on Short Answer Question 4 was 1.47 out of a possible 3 points.

This was a mainstream question that allowed students to demonstrate their knowledge of nineteenth-century economic history. Student responses varied. Some students had difficulty defining "beginning" and "industrialization." Some students were also unclear that "provide ONE example" means that the example needs to be explained. Students had some difficulty understanding the economic history of an entire century and the overlapping time periods.

Students who wrote the stronger answers understood technology and included specific examples in both tasks (A) and (B). Some of the most common examples that students used included transportation developments (such as railroads, steamboats, and the Erie Canal), Andrew Carnegie, John D. Rockefeller, Lowell textile mills, the development of large corporations, and the expansion of manufacturing in the North during the Civil War. Students were able to use any of the periods to successfully answer the question.

What mostly separated the high scores from the lower scores was students' ability to explain specific terms and developments and to present a good explanation as to why one period marked the beginning and the other did not (going beyond just saying that one period happened chronologically before the other).

What were common student errors or omissions?

Students often could not correctly place individuals, events, and developments in their proper time period. Students also had trouble defining "beginning" and "industrialization," and they had trouble determining how to deal with the overlapping time periods. Finally, because this was the fourth short-answer question, some students may have run out of time. Some responses were blank; some responses had very short answers; and some responses had trouble starting and crossed out their first attempt.

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?

Periodization is a new skill for most students. Teachers should have students practice analyzing when historical periods start and end as well as discussing turning points. Teachers should have their students practice this question type, focusing on answering the question that is asked, including specific details, and providing sufficient explanation. Students especially need to practice explaining why one of the other answers is not as good or persuasive.

Question 1 (Document-Based Question)

What was the intent of this question?

The Document-Based Question 1 allowed students to analyze the reasons for the development of new conservatism in the U.S. between 1960 and 1989 using a set of historical documents and excerpts. The question covered Periods 8 and 9 and required students to analyze specific background information and primary source evidence to explain the reasons why the mood of the country grew more conservative during the time period.

How well did students perform on this question?

The mean score on the Document Based Question was 2.59 out of a possible 7 points.

Many readers perceived scores on the Document-Based Question to be quite low as they adapted to the redesigned analytic and multi-dimensional rubric. In fact, however, the "Mean/Max" statistic (mean score divided by the maximum possible points) indicates the scores on the DBQ rose slightly over recent past years.

What were common student errors or omissions?

Thesis statements that did not explicitly answer the question were a significant problem. Some students misread the question and concentrated on the goals of new conservatism rather than the factors that led to its rise. Many students failed to receive extended analysis points because they failed to analyze either point of view, audience, historical context, or the purpose of the document. Lack of outside information continues

to be a problem. Many students failed to receive the contextualization point because they failed to discuss concurrent events that might have influenced the rise of new conservatism. Also, many students made no attempt or inadequate attempts at the synthesis point by merely dropping in superficial knowledge of earlier or later time periods without clear elaboration as to how they related to the rise of new conservatism.

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?

Important: The analytic rubric will be altered before the 2016 exam. It is imperative that teachers understand the changes and prepare their students for those changes. Students should also be instructed in what constitutes effective historical writing: thesis development, effective use of evidence and documents, and understanding thematic treatment.

Long Essay Question 2

What was the intent of this question?

Long Essay Question 2 allowed students to evaluate the extent to which the Seven Years' War (French and Indian War) marked a turning point in American relations with Great Britain, analyzing what changed and what stayed the same from the period before the war to the period after. The question assessed the historical thinking skill of periodization and covered Period 3, which ranges from 1754 to 1800.

How well did students perform on this question?

The mean score on Long Essay Question 2 was 2.34 out of a possible 6 points.

Overall, the students performed well. Their understanding of the French and Indian War and its aftermath, though not comprehensive, was generally acceptable. In relation to previous years, student responses to this early period of U.S. History question were surprisingly more focused and knowledgeable of the time period. Students were generally able to provide specific evidence for the support of their argument.

The majority of students understood the basic sequence of events, especially the role of debt and subsequent taxation in fueling a political crisis that degenerated into armed conflict. Students also seemed generally aware of the impact of the Proclamation of 1763.

What were common student errors or omissions?

The most common errors had to do with chronology. One of the most common errors was the statement that the Navigation Acts were enacted after the French and Indian War. Other common errors were a belief that the Intolerable Acts were one of the taxation efforts by the British and that the colonial reaction to those acts was the Boston Tea Party or the Boston Massacre. Essays also frequently conflated the War of 1812 and the French and Indian War, or confused the chronology of the French and Indian War and the American Revolution.

There was also some confusion over the use of the term "American" in the question. While most essays took it as the colonists living in North America, some took it to as a call to discuss the Native Americans, and others interpreted the use of this word as an indication that the American Revolution had already occurred and then referenced the United States throughout their response.

The synthesis point on the rubric revealed the area of greatest weakness for many students. Students had difficulty in synthesizing and connecting the information from the period effectively (in a coherent,

persuasive manner) to the period covered in the question; many students attempted the skill by asserting a connection but didn't follow through with persuasive reasoning for the connection.

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 work with students on dissecting questions to not only better identify the type of question (in this case a periodization question that was OFTEN mistaken for a change and continuity question), but also how to frame thesis statements to capture the dissected elements of the question. Almost all long essay questions ask that the thesis statements directly target all parts of the question, but this is rarely done by students. Teachers need to work consistently on aiding students to answer all parts of the question.

Teachers need to ensure that their students understand that "Evaluate the extent" calls for the student to make a qualitative or quantitative statement to address the prompt. "How much" adjectives or adverbs are a necessary part of a periodization essay.

The historical thinking skill of periodization was generally not dealt with in a substantive way. Students could more effectively define their period of discussion through the use of specific dates and/or specific events. The use of specific dates would enable students to make historical connections outside of that defined period to better enable synthesis.

"Turning point" means that the prompt is a periodization prompt, and the additional language in the prompt regarding differences and similarities are not intended to be continuity and change over time prompts. Before writing, students should think about the periods before and after the defined period and describe differences and similarities from one period to the next.

Essays should not sacrifice good writing in the hope of getting a score point, especially in the synthesis dimension. The condition precedent for synthesis requires the student to write a "coherent and persuasive essay." The "laundry list" of evidence is not as effective as a few examples that are well-explained and utilized in a persuasive argument.

In writing the conclusion, students should be instructed to think about extending or modifying the thesis, as opposed to simply restating.

Long Essay Question 3

What was the intent of this question?

Long Essay Question 3 allowed students to evaluate the extent to which the Mexican-American War marked a turning point in the debate over slavery in the U.S., analyzing what changed and what stayed the same from the period before the war to the period after. The question assessed the historical thinking skill of periodization and covered Period 5, which ranges from 1844 to 1877.

How well did students perform on this question?

The mean score on Long Essay Question 3 was 2.00 out of a possible 6 points.

The readers of this question noted that essays tended towards the descriptive and leaned heavily on description of the spread of slavery, rather than the debate over slavery. Sound student responses provided an evaluative thesis statement noting "how much" of a turning point the Mexican-American War was in the debate over slavery. High scoring answers provided an accurate chronology of the events before and after the Mexican-American War with emphasis on how the various events/policies, etc. specifically related to the

change in the slavery debate. Students used explanations of these events in order to analyze similarities and differences before and/or after the war. The best evidence provided clear linkages to the thesis statement. Many students did not clearly define similarities and differences before and/or after the war as requested in the prompt and thus missed periodization points.

What were common student errors or omissions?

THESIS

By far, the most common error was that students simply restated the question, asserting that the Mexican-American War constituted a turning point in the debate over slavery, without including an evaluative statement required by the prompt. Some students ignored the issue of debate over slavery and merely described the issue of slavery and what changed and what remained the same. Relatively few students understood that a viable thesis was to state that the Mexican-American War was not a turning point and to provide an alternative turning point.

ARGUMENTATION/USE OF EVIDENCE

Essays most frequently made errors on the following:

- Confusing the Missouri Compromise and the Compromise of 1850
- Stating that the Missouri Compromise and the “Compromise of 1820” were separate phenomena
- Expressing a belief that slaves gained rights after the Mexican-American War
- Confusing the Mexican-American War and the war for Texas independence, asserting that Texas was admitted as a state under the Compromise of 1850
- Expressing a belief that the United States had to maintain a balance between free states and slave states due to law
- Demonstrating a general lack of knowledge regarding the chronology of events in the time period, especially whether they were before or after the Mexican-American War
- Showing no clear understanding of the concept of popular sovereignty in the territories
- Focusing too much on “listing” events and neglecting to analyze the arguments inherent in the discussion of slavery
- Expressing a belief that Texas was paired with Maine as part of the Missouri Compromise, or the Compromise of 1820
- Describing slaves fighting in the Mexican-American War, hoping to gain freedom after the war

APPLICATION OF HISTORICAL THINKING SKILL/PERIODIZATION

The highest scoring responses analyzed similarities and differences before and/or following the war with specific examples. When responses did not receive points on this dimension, it was because they did not clearly trace similarities or differences, either before or after the war. Confused chronology also made it difficult for readers to determine how well the students understood periodization.

SYNTHESIS

There were three different ways a response could demonstrate synthesis. Those responses that did not receive a point for synthesis were usually confused, not well organized, not supported with specific evidence, and neither appropriately extended or modified the thesis, employed an additional category of analysis (e.g., political, economic, social, cultural, geographic, racial, or gender-oriented), nor appropriately connected the debate over slavery to another historical period, area, context, or circumstance.

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?

In short, answer the question asked, not the one you (the student or the teacher) wished had been asked. Please teach students to do the following:

- Write an explicit thesis in the opening paragraph with explanation or context; many efforts at writing a thesis simply rephrased the question.
- Follow the rubric that will be used to score the essay, particularly the qualitative elements.
- Remember that a reader will have a much easier time detecting subtle synthesis if, as the rubric notes, the essay synthesizes “the argument, evidence, and context into a coherent and persuasive essay.”
- Manage their time on each section of the exam by practicing timed-essays in class. Many students seemed to have run out of time trying to complete the second essay.
- Not underline the thesis statement as sometimes the wrong part of the essay is underlined.
- Use synthesis as an integral part of the essay, not a sentence added at the end of the essay (many students were unclear about synthesis in general).
- Avoid trying to impress the reader with fancy vocabulary if the meaning is uncertain as it detracts from the overall essay.