



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

The following comments on the 2012 free-response questions for AP® World History were written by the Chief Reader, Dean T. Ferguson of Texas A&M University–Kingsville. 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 intended to analyze the relationship between politics and the game of cricket in South Asia from 1880 to 2005. The question featured a rich variety of documents for students to use in their analysis. Rather than construing the term “politics” narrowly, the documents encouraged an interpretation of the political that extended beyond activities related simply to state functions or governmental institutions. The question invited responses that examined the role of cricket as a vehicle for articulating a variety of political aims, including British imperial objectives, emerging Indian nationalism, caste and religious rivalry, and competition between India and Pakistan. Most of the documents also provided helpful possibilities for discussions of point of view.

How well did students perform on this question?

The mean score was 2.45 out of a possible 9 points.

In terms of the thesis, students were required to address a specific relationship between cricket and politics in South Asia. Merely stating that there were positive and negative aspects to the relationship was not sufficient, as students were expected to qualify their argument more clearly. Still, over half the students offered a successful thesis, a distinct improvement over last year. Students regularly scored 3 or 4 core points on these elements.

Students generally addressed and understood all the documents. Though some documents were occasionally misinterpreted, there was no single document that was consistently misread or misunderstood. Most students were able to place the documents into three appropriate groups. Evidence was usually found in the documents, and many students received 2 points for identifying evidence in nine or 10 documents.

Many students analyzed the documents by grouping them in three or more groups, reflecting successful work on the part of teachers in explaining this skill to their students. Students interpreted the word “politics” in a broad sense. Therefore they adeptly identified uses of the 10 documents in many ways, including description of the politics of the caste system, the politics of religious division and unity, and the politics of developing nationalism in the face of British imperialism. One of the important ways in which the relationship between cricket and politics was analyzed was by effectively grouping the documents. Among the groups that students employed were the following:

- Unity within South Asia or India
- Unity between South Asia/India and Great Britain
- Relaxing of religious tensions between Hindus and Muslims
- Exacerbating religious tensions
- Breaking caste or ethnic barriers

What were common student errors or omissions?

Although attempts at point of view (core point 4) continue to increase each year, only a minority of these were successful this year. Some students continue to merely identify a “bias” in a source, based primarily on attribution of the document, without qualifying why or how the particular identity of the source has informed the document’s tone or perspective. As in previous years, students were expected to situate the author or tone of the document. Having done this in some cases, students still did not provide an adequate rationale for their claim about perspective.

As with point of view, more students are attempting to satisfy the requirement of suggesting an additional document (core point 6). However, most of the attempts were unsuccessful. Many envisioned a different document from those that were provided, but, as with the point-of-view point, they did not offer a substantial rationale for how that additional document would contribute to greater understanding of the relationship between cricket and politics. Attempts to identify point of view ought to refer back to a specific source, but the additional document must contribute to answering the specific prompt. In this case few students successfully linked their additional document idea to the relationship between cricket and politics in South Asia.

Noticeable improvement has been made in thesis writing, and there is continued success in grouping, understanding, and using the documents for evidence. Improvement in the areas of point-of-view and additional document can be characterized as flat.

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 essays revealed that teachers have succeeded in preparing their students to read and answer the question effectively, produce an acceptable thesis, and conduct good analysis of the documents. One minor suggestion is that students ought to be told to establish at least three document groups in their essays because this is likely to continue as an expectation.

More critically, teachers would be well advised to devote more attention to explaining the point-of-view and additional-document requirements throughout the course. It is true that these skills, when attained, reflect a higher order of historical thinking that is not typical of all students. That said, it is likely that with continued instruction and reinforcement, these scores will improve on future document-based questions.

Students should be encouraged to consider the perspective of all documents that they engage in the AP World History course. When writing practice essays, students could improve their performance on the additional document by conceiving of an additional document for each of their grouped paragraphs

because the grouping will be fresh in their mind and the paragraph can help serve as justification for the new document. In other words, each grouping implies either an evidentiary position, against which alternatives might be juxtaposed, or similar perspectives, again with an easily imagined alternative document, the explanation for which would naturally follow from the logic that sustained grouping those documents together in the first place.

Question 2

What was the intent of this question?

The intent of this question was for students to identify and analyze continuity and change in trade networks between Africa and Eurasia during the time period circa 300 C.E. to 1450 C.E. Students were also expected to provide historical evidence to support a discussion of change and continuity in trade networks between the two regions and to explain change and continuity within a world historical context.

The AP World History course is designed to support student learning of four key historical thinking skills, one of which is “the ability to recognize, analyze, and evaluate the dynamics of historical continuity and change over periods of time of varying length, as well as relating these patterns to larger historical processes or themes.” Additionally, AP World History is anchored by five course themes. Although this question aligns with many of them, it is explicitly aligned with Theme 4: Creation, Expansion, and Interaction of Economic Systems. This question provided an opportunity for students to demonstrate an understanding of historical content and the application of historical thinking skills.

How well did students perform on this question?

The mean score was 2.02 out of a possible 9 points.

Students demonstrated considerable knowledge of trade networks in Africa and Eurasia (i.e., trans-Saharan trade routes, Silk Roads, Indian Ocean trade routes) and some knowledge of goods, ideas, and technologies transmitted along these trade networks. Some essays contained sophisticated discussions of trade networks between Africa and Eurasia in the specified time period that demonstrated student understanding of the process of change and continuity over time in trade networks between the two regions, the world historical context of those changes and continuities, and analyses of causes and consequences. Unfortunately, many responses were comparisons of networks in each region (similarities and differences between the regional trade networks) rather than analyses of changes and continuities in trade networks between the regions. Additionally, many responses did not contain an effective discussion of change and continuity over time within a world historical context or analysis of the process of change and continuity. Many essays also included evidence and discussions of historical events outside of the specified time period.

What were common student errors or omissions?

One of the most common errors was not addressing all parts of the question. Many students focused exclusively on changes in trade networks between the regions, with little attention to continuities. Additionally, many students analyzed change and continuity in trade networks in the regions without making explicit connections between regions. There were also many responses that compared trade networks in Eurasia to trade networks in Africa.

Many students restated the prompt as their thesis, pointedly including the word “between” in the thesis but without stating specific changes and continuities in trade networks between regions. If students did not address the prompt in the thesis, this often, but not always, meant that they did not address all parts of the question in other parts of their response. For students to earn 1 point for thesis and 2 points for

addressing the question, they had to specify at least one change and one continuity in trade networks between the two regions within the specified time period.

The vast majority of responses generally acknowledged the growth and development of Indian Ocean and trans-Saharan trade networks during this time period. Students often referenced the Silk Road trade routes but did not connect them explicitly to other trade routes leading to Africa (between regions). Some students connected Eurasian Silk Roads to Mediterranean Sea trade (Eurasian-African connection). Students often made reference to goods traded (gold, salt, slaves, spices) but did not demonstrate that they had knowledge of where particular trade goods originated and where they diffused through trade.

In general, students provided historical evidence that demonstrated they had a generic knowledge of trade networks, political and technological developments, religions, and trade goods in Eurasia and Africa, but few students demonstrated they could use that evidence to support a discussion or analysis of change and continuity in trade networks between the two regions in the specified time period.

This year, as in previous years, most students struggled with analysis. Many essays did not sufficiently analyze change and continuity across the entirety of the specified time period. Some students attempted to turn a statement of evidence into analysis of change or continuity. For example, trade networks contributed to the growth and strength of empires in the regions. Such analysis, however, was insufficient to qualify for a point because it did not specify how changes or continuities in trade networks contributed to such growth.

Very few essays recognized the spread of Christianity into East Africa. Students frequently mentioned the transmission or cultural diffusion of Islam into Africa and the rise of Islamic empires (700–1450 C.E.), but they often neglected to mention or reference the earlier collapse of the Roman Empire. Additionally, many responses contained sweeping generalizations about regions and identified Eurasia or Africa as a country or nation rather than recognizing the nuanced nature of historical experiences within each region.

In general, issues related to periodization, chronology, and geography seemed to be the primary sources of errors in relation to this question. Many students included historical evidence that was not only out of the specified time period but also out of the specified regions (e.g., discussion of trans-Atlantic slave trade, the Columbian Exchange, 19th-century imperialism, triangle trade routes, industrialization).

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 pay particular attention to teaching students to attack the question before they begin writing their responses. This year many students seemed to miss or ignore the word “between” in the prompt and wrote essays that may have addressed change and continuity in trade networks in Africa and Eurasia but not *between* them. There were also many essays that compared trade networks in each region. Teachers should encourage students to read the prompt carefully and perhaps rewrite it word-by-word or circle key words. This strategy encourages students to focus on what the prompt is asking them to address and is fundamentally useful for all learners.

Teachers should continue to reinforce student understanding of periodization and chronology. Classroom strategies that support student learning about change and continuity over time include using timelines and creating change/continuity tables. Drawing on the curriculum framework, teachers should encourage students to create graphic organizers that will help them display the big picture globally, in relation to the main course themes, and simultaneously take notes on the illustrative examples or historical evidence of those themes.

One approach may be to have students create change/continuity tables for each time period and each theme. For example, during a unit that covers the period 600 C.E.–1450 C.E., students might be required to identify, describe, and analyze changes and continuities in each of the five course themes. An activity or assignment like this may also be constructed to provide opportunities for students to work in cooperative learning groups; small groups may be assigned different themes and collaborate to complete the assignment. Each group could be required to create a poster with that information that could be displayed in the room for the remainder of the year and serve as a study tool later during review. If teachers engaged students in this type of activity during a unit, summative assessments at the end of the unit might include a change-and-continuity-over-time essay modeled after those used on previous exams.

Teachers should also continue to help students understand change and continuity within the context of world historical processes and to develop analytical writing skills. Teachers may want to practice this skill in isolation in the classroom to help prepare students do this well on the exam. In relation to the assignment referenced above, teachers could have students present their change/continuity posters to the class and then engage the class in a discussion of the world historical context for the change/continuity as well as the reasons for and consequences of the change/continuity. This activity could even be staged as a game or as a formative assessment.

The key is to create opportunities for students to learn historical content and develop these historical thinking and writing skills. Teachers should use essay questions from previous exams (available on AP Central[®]) in class as often as possible at appropriate intervals. There are many past change-and-continuity-over-time questions that can be used to either teach content or to assess student understanding at the end of units. Each essay question has an operational scoring guide that accompanies it as well as sample student essays. Assigning the questions to students and using the scoring guides to provide feedback to students is one of the best ways to support the development of historical and analytical writing skills. Analysis is an enduring skill in the AP World History course, and learning how to prepare students to think, read, and write analytically should continue to be the focus of teacher professional development.

Question 3

What was the intent of this question?

The intent of this question was for students to identify and explain similarities and differences in the demographic and environmental effects of the Columbian Exchange from 1492 to 1750 on two regions: the Americas and either Asia, Africa, or Europe. Students were required to choose one of three regions (Asia, Africa, or Europe) to compare and contrast with the Americas. The question was intended to assess students' knowledge of Key Concept 4.1.V, including each of the subpoints A through E. It was also intended to assess students' historical thinking skills, particularly comparison and contextualization (skill 3), and their thematic understanding of Period 4 (1450–1750), particularly as it relates to theme 1, interaction between humans and the environment.

How well did students perform on this question?

The mean score was 1.63 out of a total possible of 9 points.

The majority of students were familiar with the Columbian Exchange. As a result, most students wrote substantive essays for this question, even if many of them were not actually responsive to the prompt. Many students were able to describe the Columbian Exchange, explain the economic and commercial impacts, or link the Columbian Exchange with the rise of colonial power in the Americas. However, fewer students were able to write a response focused on the Columbian Exchange's demographic and environmental effects. Although students could identify environmental effects relating to changes in crops and the expansion of plantation systems of agricultural production, the term "demographic" seemed to

throw off many students. Nevertheless, most students familiar with the topic knew to write about the slave trade as an integral part of the Columbian Exchange and earned credit for addressing demographics as a result.

Excellent student responses included a clear thesis statement and repeated direct statements of similarity and difference. Essays earning the top scores were also able to provide a depth of nuanced analysis showing the interrelated nature of regional exchanges, whereas the analysis in the midrange essays usually relied on more generic reassertions of the Columbian Exchange metanarrative of disease impacts in the Americas or the impacts of the increase of calorie-rich food in Europe. Similarly, lower midrange essays relied on more generic evidence, but essays that scored better offered plentiful specific and concrete evidence for their explanations, often citing and explaining specific diseases or crops.

Many students did not attempt this question or made extremely short attempts, indicating that they did not manage their time well. However, students with clear familiarity with the topic answered this question first or second and generated lengthy responses.

What were common student errors or omissions?

Overall the most common error was writing what the students knew about the Columbian Exchange rather than addressing the focus areas of the question. Many students described colonization in the Americas or the commercial trade and never addressed the demographic or environmental effects. This may have been a factor of the students' familiarity with the topic, but it also demonstrates students' overall inability to parse the prompt before jumping into the writing.

Not generating a clear and comprehensive thesis statement was a second common error. Of course, without parsing the prompt first, the ability to generate a thesis responding to the prompt is difficult, but students also had difficulty crafting a strong thesis statement that included similarities and differences and did not rely on vague generalities like "positive and negative" or "beneficial and harmful" or a very weak assertion of "both." Very few thesis statements were analytic.

A third common error was not writing clear and direct statements of similarity and difference. Many students with good topic knowledge lacked the skills necessary to write statements that drew similarities or differences directly. Although this is a fundamental skill in the course, many students have not practiced enough to develop knowledge of the writing mechanics necessary to explicitly articulate the similarities or differences. Higher-scoring essays all demonstrated ease with the vocabulary of drawing direct statements (e.g., "unlike," "by contrast," "whereas," "analogous," "parallel," "matching," "equivalent"), but the language of comparison was almost uniformly absent from lower-performing essays.

Other common errors included not drawing exclusively from the period. For example, many students included the environmental effects of industrialization or the effects of the Black Death as central parts of their essays despite the fact that these are both clearly outside the time frame established by the question. Similarly, some essays included long descriptions of Native American populations and civilizations prior to the arrival of European explorers.

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 devote more direct instruction to practice parsing the prompt (attacking the question) with students as often as possible to develop the skills of deconstructing the language of the prompt to identify the tasks required as well as the content expectations. This is especially significant as the first step in teaching students to develop the structure of the essay before they begin writing.

Teachers should devote more direct instruction to the mechanics of writing explicit statements of similarity and difference. Students should brainstorm and then memorize and practice using comparative vocabulary. This vocabulary can be reinforced periodically in reading quizzes, quick-write activities, or daily summaries and wrap-up activities so that students develop a facility with its use. Teachers should reinforce the idea that statements of similarity should show, not tell. That is, comparative statements should not indicate the comparative category or where to find a similarity in the information (e.g., “The similarities in X and Y are in the population changes”) but should lay out the difference or similarity explicitly for the reader (e.g., “The populations of Native Americans decreased, whereas the populations of Europe increased”).

In teaching the expectations of the comparative essay to their students, teachers should emphasize a structure for the comparative essay that forces students to develop the ability to craft explicit statements of similarities and differences. Teachers should require that essays include topic sentences for each body paragraph that are explicit statements of comparison and contrast.

In writing practice essays, students should be strongly discouraged from relying on the word “both” to indicate similarities because too often they do not construct a statement that truly applies to both sides of the comparison. Students can practice writing explicit statements of similarity and difference in activities that do not involve writing a complete essay. Also, students should be strongly discouraged from writing comparisons that rely on generic qualifications (e.g., positive for Europe and negative for Africa).