Student Performance Q&A:
2015 AP® World History Free-Response Questions

The following comments on the 2015 free-response questions for AP® World History were written by the Chief Reader, Tim Keirn, California State University at Long Beach. 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?

The document-based question (DBQ) directly addresses Curriculum Framework Key Concept 6.1 (Science and the Environment). The 1918 Influenza Pandemic is specifically identified as one of the illustrative examples in Section III (Disease, scientific innovations, and conflict led to demographic shifts).

Students were asked to analyze the varied responses to the 1918–1919 Influenza Pandemic in the nine documents. The nine documents lent themselves to comparing responses to the pandemic in various places around the world as well as responses from persons of varied roles and socioeconomic backgrounds. These responses included volunteering to help the sick, isolation or quarantine to prevent infection, paralysis or lack of action, and arriving at the belief that the pandemic was caused by divine intervention. These four responses became the basis for the most common groupings, though other groupings included blaming the government, fear, and demoralization among others.

The documents provided ample basis for a thorough response to the prompt. The details, coupled with the clear language in the documents, made their effective use as evidence and support for analysis straightforward. Each of the nine documents offered at least one clearly identifiable response that could be paired with a response in another document, though many documents had more than one pairing option. Most of the document attributions gave ample grounds for students to use as a basis for analyzing the point of view of the source. The language used in many of the documents also provided a means of analyzing point of view by evaluating tone. Although some students had difficulty with document 5 due to lack of familiarity with the ideology of Christian Scientists, many were still able to make full use of the document, including its tone.

How well did students perform on this question?

The mean score on the DBQ was 3.1 on a scale of 0 to 9 points. Generally students performed well on this question; overall they were able to understand the question, read and grasp the basic meaning of the question and documents, and write lengthy essays with some analysis. Though some students wrote essays focused on effects of the pandemic rather than responses, many were able to earn points for understanding the documents, identifying a response in each of the documents and grouping the documents in three ways. Readers most commonly saw groups based on volunteering / aiding the sick, inaction of governments, and the emergence of religious beliefs about the pandemic, though the better essays found many other ways to group the documents around other responses as well. Many more students attempted to complete all the tasks of the scoring guidelines and, as a result, there has been a general increase in the quality of the essays.

What were common student errors or omissions?

Nearly all students attempted the question, many wrote longer, better-developed essays with more analysis and explanation of the documents than in the past. Rather than identify and analyze responses, some students did not parse/analyze the question well enough and focused on the effects of the pandemic or the causes for the spread of the disease.

- **Core Point 1 –** Although many students were able to identify responses to the spread of influenza, often their thesis statement did not go beyond the identification. A few said nothing more than that there were positive and negative responses, which was not acceptable as a thesis.

- **Core Point 2 –** The majority of students addressed all nine documents. A minority of students omitted one or more document altogether. Some students who lacked an understanding of the beliefs of Christian Scientists had difficulty demonstrating an understanding of document 5. Some students had difficulty with documents 4 and 8, claiming that the author held the views of the groups on which he was reporting.

- **Core Point 3 –** Students who understood the documents were able to identify some response in each of them. Some students attempted to use only direct quotations with minimal or no integration as evidence and, therefore, did not earn points. Students must interpret the documents with description, explanation, and analysis since the documents don't speak for themselves.

- **Core Point 4 –** Though more students attempted an analysis of point of view of the documents than in the past, many are still not attempting an analysis of point of view. Of those who did, many amounted to a description of the content of the document without ever rising to an explanation of the motivation for the document or a qualification of the information in the document. Often students used the attribution to make vague statements about bias or unsubstantiated assumptions about reliability without explaining the significance of these claims to their analysis.

- **Core Point 5 –** In order to form a group, students needed to link at least two documents by identifying a common response to the influenza pandemic explicitly. In order to earn the core point, students had to make three groupings in the essay. Students who merely listed documents by number did not earn the core point. Students who made groups around an effect also did not earn credit.

- **Core Point 6 –** Though more students attempted the additional document request than in the past, many did not earn credit because they did not explain why the document, source, or voice requested would be valuable for their analysis of responses to the influenza pandemic. Also, some students do not earn credit because they requested a document, source, or voice that either is already within the set of nine documents or is too similar to one of the nine provided, without an explanation of how additional information would aid their analysis.

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 who ensure that their students understand and have practiced all the core points of the DBQ scoring guidelines in their essays consistently throughout the year are to be highly commended. However, teachers should also coach students to parse the prompt carefully before examining the documents so that the students can read the documents intentionally looking for the specific information they will need to answer the question thoroughly. Teachers should coach students to make three groupings of documents around the content focus words in the prompt ("responses to the spread of influenza" in this case) and to write a thesis based on those groupings rather than relying on generic categorizations like positive / negative or social / economic / political or according to type of source document. Teachers need to have students link the individual documents they read in class to their textbooks either using the document as evidence for the textbook argument or using the textbook as context for an interpretation of the document. Teachers should also have students read documents in pairs (either opposing or complementary) and ask students to synthesize the two documents to support a claim. The components of the DBQ should be considered necessary elements of good expository writing and should be practiced to develop them as writing habits.

Question 2

What was the intent of this question?

The intent of this question was for students to select one of the regions provided (Latin America, including the Caribbean; or North America) and then to identify and explain changes and continuities in the selected region's labor systems between circa 1450 and 1900. In particular the question measured the historical thinking skill of chronological reasoning (Skill 2), especially the subskill of working with patterns of change and continuity over time. The question directly addresses Periods 4 (1450–1750) and 5 (1750–1900). The question also directly addresses the fourth theme of the course (Creation, Expansion, and Interaction of Economic Systems) within a period when that theme is substantially related to many other historical developments of the period. The question most directly relates to Key Concepts 4.1 (the Atlantic System and the Columbian Exchange), 4.2 (New Forms of Social Organization and Modes of Production), 5.1 (Industrialization and Global Capitalism), and 5.2 (Imperialism and Nation-State Formation).

How well did students perform on this question?

The mean score on this question was 3.0 on a scale of 0 to 9 points. Generally students performed well on this question; overall they were able to effectively identify changes in labor systems in either of the choices, Latin American and the Caribbean or North America. Students were able to explain how factors such as European colonization of the Americas, the development of plantation agriculture, the enslavement of Africans, abolitionist movements, and the Industrial Revolution all contributed to changes in labor systems during this period. Students also demonstrated considerable knowledge of the components of various labor systems and how those labor systems influenced economic development during this period.

What were common student errors or omissions?

Students commonly omitted or inadequately qualified addressing and analyzing continuity. They often did not qualify their continuity and change in the thesis. Students' demonstrations of understandings of agricultural systems were often inaccurate or too vague to be scored. Accurately placing historical events proved to be difficult for many students, leading to inaccurate analyses and arguments. Addressing and analyzing the gendered structures of labor systems often were unsophisticated and could not be scored.

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 be commended for their treatment of the content of this essay. Students frequently received numerous evidence points because they were able to accurately identify labor systems and their key components in both Latin America and North America. Essays that focused on Latin America tended to be particularly sophisticated, illustrating adequate preparation for the exam. Teachers should spend additional time assisting students in their analysis of continuity and on how to frame and qualify thesis statements.

Question 3

What was the intent of this question?

The question asked students to identify and analyze similarities and differences in any TWO of the following trade networks (Indian Ocean, Silk Roads, Trans-Sahara) in the period 600 C.E. to 1450 C.E. Students were prompted that their response could include examples of biological, commercial, or cultural exchanges. In particular, the question measured the historical thinking skill of comparison and contextualization (Skill 3). The question directly addresses Period 3 (600–1450). The question also directly addresses the fourth theme of the course (Creation, Expansion, and Interaction of Economic Systems) within a period when that theme is substantially related to many other historical developments of the period. The question most directly relates to Key Concepts 3.1 (Expansion and Intensification of Communication and Exchange Networks) and 3.2 (Continuity and Innovation of State Forms and their Interactions).

How well did students perform on this question?

The mean score on this question was 2.71 on a scale of 0 to 9 points. Many students appeared to have at least some information about trade networks in this time period. Most essays discussed commonalities in luxury-goods trade, with the better essays going into great detail on specific goods, inventions, methods of transportation, and economic forces surrounding the trade. Many essays also discussed transmission of religions such as Buddhism, Islam, and Christianity, and transmission of diseases like the bubonic plague. Most mid-level essays were able to score one or both evidence points. Stronger essays often mentioned ten or more discrete characteristics of the relevant trade networks.

Most students attempted a comparative structure within the essay. Many of those responses contained multiple complex and sophisticated comparisons; however, a large number of essays only provided generalities instead of specific comparisons. Generally speaking, students were able to successfully address similarity and difference, and many were able to add a third comparison for the additional direct-comparison point. Stronger essays tended to use more than three comparisons and attempted to analyze the reasons for them. The best comparisons went well beyond length or location of trade networks and compared influences of technological advancement, impact of state formation, or effect of environmental patterns.

What were common student errors or omissions?

Students frequently offered comparisons that were too broad, such as both networks had cultural and commercial similarities. Many students failed to earn the point for addressing difference because they did not specify the difference in both trade networks, such as one difference is that the Silk Roads came under Mongol control, without specifying how that condition might be different from the situation on the comparable trade network. The most common errors in evidence were vagueness, anachronism, or mistaken regional attribution.

Quite a few essays neglected to present a well-organized thesis addressing the entire prompt, though failed theses that were accurate as either a similarity or difference could earn a point for addressing these aspects.

Few essays successfully analyzed a reason for a similarity or difference, making that analysis score point the clearest differentiator between student essays.

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?

With practice, students can learn to improve the specificity, number, and analytical sophistication of their comparisons. Students should always aim to identify and precisely characterize multiple similarities and multiple differences, first in the thesis, and then one by one in body paragraphs filled with evidence. Precision in these matters will help organize the essay, and help ensure that the student earns credit for a thesis, for addressing similarity and difference beyond the thesis, and for making another direct comparison.

In the essay body, students should remember to attempt causal analysis of each individual comparison (similarity or difference). The thesis example above sets up this causal analysis particularly of the difference. This analysis can be successfully done in a sentence at the end of each body paragraph, if the student is not yet ready to integrate causal analysis throughout.