



Student Performance Q&A:

2002 AP[®] French Language Free-Response Questions

The following comments are provided by the Chief Reader regarding the 2002 free-response questions for AP French Language. *They are intended to assist AP readers as they develop training sessions to help teachers better prepare their students for the AP Exams.* They give an overview of each question and its performance, 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 included. Readers are encouraged to use their expertise to create strategies for teachers to improve student performance in specific areas.

Part A: Fill-Ins

What was intended by the question?

The French language fill-ins are intended to test the student's grammar skills and offer a more objective measure than the language essay itself. There are 30 items in this section: 15 so-called 'function words' and 15 verb forms. These fill-ins are contextualized in small paragraphs and every effort is made to write these paragraphs so that there is only one possible answer.

The only problem question came at the very beginning of the exam in the function word section: "écouter sans bailer." The readers and the essay team leaders all felt that this difficult question at the beginning of the exam may have disoriented the students. The statistics show that students did miss this question in great numbers and indeed their performance on the function word section was well below that of last year's performance.

How well did students perform?

Students did not perform as well as last year's students. The verb forms presented no particular problems, but as noted above, the function words did present problems. It is still surprising to me how many of the obvious answers they miss.

What were common errors or omissions?

Students did not always read directions carefully; therefore, they may have used two-word answers or failed to make proper agreements with verbs. It is obvious in some cases that they had not read the paragraph entirely before beginning their answer.

In the function words, the common errors included the usual suspects—relative pronouns after prepositions and prepositions used with infinitives. In the verb section, problems included the use of subjunctives and the future (or future perfect) in a future context where we normally use present or present perfect forms in English. The verb tenses were very straightforward and at a moderate level of difficulty. Students should learn proper sequencing of tenses.

Based on your experience at the AP Reading, what message would you like to send to teachers that could improve the performance of their students on the exam?

Students need to continue to review grammar and practice using basic structures. As a general rule, they should read good solid prose more often. It might be a good exercise to regularly take prose passages that the students have been reading and leave out certain verbs or so-called ‘function words’ for practice.

Part A: Essay

What was intended by the question?

The essay question in general is designed to allow students to demonstrate the level at which they can express themselves in appropriate written French while addressing a specified topic. This year’s question asked them to talk about the value of travel for young people.

How well did students perform?

As usual, student performance ranged from very poor to outstanding. The question was quite clear and allowed students at all levels to demonstrate their competence (or lack thereof). Students generally performed better than last year’s students.

What were common errors or omissions?

- Failure to address the topic as presented.
- Needless repetitions (of ideas, of vocabulary, of whole statements).
- Inappropriate use of memorized French expressions.
- The usual mistakes of grammar and usage. (**Subject-verb agreement**; mistakes of **noun gender** (“toute la monde”); failure to remember **irregular forms** (“font” for “font”); problems with –re and –ir verbs (“je mette,” “j’ai finissé”); misuse of **articles and prepositions** (“beaucoup des” for “beaucoup de” may be a sign of limited control of grammar); inability to use **the subjunctive** to say “I want him to do it,” “she wants me to do it,” etc.; misuse of **vocabulary** (“tout le monde” used in order to express “the whole world.”))

Based on your experience at the AP Reading, what message would you like to send to teachers that could improve the performance of their students on the exam?

To become competent essay writers, students must learn to:

- organize their remarks into an introduction, a body, and a conclusion that does not merely restate the introduction;
- enrich their exposition with effective allusion to personal experience, news items, anecdotes, and so on;
- make appropriate use of “connecting” expressions such as “d’ailleurs,” “néanmoins,” “en plus,” “pourtant,” “à cause de,” rhetorical questions, and the like; and
- produce a sense of idiomatic French, rather than the impression that one is reading something clumsily translated into French.

In order to better prepare their students, teachers should:

- persuade students that they must **read** a lot of French if they are going to learn to write it correctly; and
- provide opportunities to **review the basics**, using **authentic texts**. For example, one can locate all sorts of French texts on the Internet by typing French words into a search engine. These texts can be copied and pasted into an electronic file, and then subjected to various manipulations. Words and expressions falling into a certain category (verbs, articles, “function words,” idiomatic phrases) can be replaced with a blank line, and students can be instructed to restore the missing words (which can be completely absent, or else listed alphabetically below the passage). Students themselves could prepare such exercises for the class (subject to the teacher’s obligatory review of the original text taken from the Web).

Part B: Speaking

What was intended by the question?

Since 1998, the format for both parts of the exam has consisted of questions which progress from concrete (based on a series of pictures) to abstract (requiring a more general or personal answer). The first question encourages the use of apt vocabulary and proper sequencing of events with attendant terminology (“d’abord,” “ensuite,” “et puis,” “enfin”). The second question personalizes what the student has seen in the picture sequence (in this exam by asking the importance of a driver’s license for young people) and the third question pushes toward more abstract expression based on an aspect of the picture sequence (this year, the role parents play in the lives of their children). The second picture sequence usually sets up a comparison or a contrast. Question 4 asks for a description, again encouraging proper sequencing of tenses and proper cause-to-effect structures. Question 5 is more speculative, asking students to comment on the role of computers in our daily life.

How well did students perform?

There is always a mix of good and poor responses and the grades seemed to spread across the scale. The students seemed to have a good understanding of the questions.

What were common errors or omissions?

The most common errors that we find in correcting the exam include that students do not pick up on the tenses asked in the questions (they rely often on the use of the present tense) and tend to favor descriptions to explanations or comments. They also tend to give enumerations and lists for questions asking for comparisons or pros and cons. If they stumble on a particular vocabulary word, they seldom rely on circumlocutions to get out of a bind.

Based on your experience at the AP Reading, what message would you like to send to teachers that could improve the performance of their students on the exam?

During training sessions, teachers should:

- tell students to use the allotted 60 seconds to the fullest;
- tell students to look out for two-part questions;
- tell students to avoid giving lists of vocabulary when answering questions;
- practice the exam format with their students on tape recorders on a regular basis;
- review core vocabulary with students. This includes synonyms and antonyms to help them answer questions which ask about the pros and cons of a given situation;
- practice more abstract types of answers, usually in preparation for the third and fifth questions;
- teach students words of transition, comparative and superlative structures;
- practice “si” clauses with the students;
- teach students the difference between “Commentez,” “Racontez,” “Contrastez,” “Décrivez,” etc.; and
- help students practice circumlocutions when building up vocabulary.