



**Student Performance Q&A:  
2006 AP® Italian Language and Culture  
Free-Response Questions**

The following comments on the 2006 free-response questions for AP® Italian Language and Culture were written by the Chief Reader, Frank Nuessel of the University of Louisville in Kentucky. 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.

**Writing Tasks 1 and 2: Paragraph Completion (Verbs) and Paragraph Completion (Non-Verbs)**

***What was the intent of this question?***

This part of the exam comprises two separate passages from authentic Italian sources. The first task tests the ability to identify and write appropriate verbs. It comprises a passage which contains 10 blanks; for each blank, the infinitive of the missing verb is provided in parentheses. Students are allotted a total of 5 minutes to write the correct form of each verb. It is important to read the entire passage carefully and use the contextual information provided to determine the appropriate verb form. The response for each of the 10 blanks is scored individually and must be completely correct to receive credit; all 10 scores count equally in calculating the total score. Depending on the tense of the verb and whether or not it is reflexive, the correct answer may consist of one to three words. The *AP Italian Language and Culture Course Description* lists examples of types of verb forms that may be assessed in this task; of course, not all of these forms appear in any one passage. Among those included in this year's passage were indicative and subjunctive verb forms, present tense, *passato prossimo*, *imperfetto*, and infinitives. The topic was the history of the @ symbol.

The second task follows a similar format and has the same time limit but tests the ability to identify and write words other than verbs, including prepositions, articles, and pronouns. No parenthetical cues are given, and the correct answer is always a single word. Again, it is important to read the entire passage carefully and use the contextual information provided to determine the appropriate

form to write in each blank. Among the forms tested in this year’s passage were definite and indefinite articles, articulated prepositions, prepositions, articulated articles, demonstratives, possessives, and clitic pronouns. The topic was the opera singer Renata Tebaldi.

***How well did students perform on this question?***

The mean score for the Standard Group\* was 6.73 out of a possible 20 points. The mean score for the Total Group was 7.75. These tasks proved very difficult for most students. Many were unprepared to perform well on these exercises, which require complete grammatical accuracy.

***What were common student errors or omissions?***

Some common errors in the verb paragraph completion included writing *è nato* in blank number 2 (*nasca, sia nato*), the use of the *passato prossimo* or another tense instead of the imperfect in number 4 (*aveva*) and number 10 (*serviva*), and responding with an incorrect conjugated form instead of the infinitive in number 5 (*consultare*) and number 9 (*essere usato, usare*). Many students also missed number 8 (*si dimostra, si è dimostrato*).

Some common errors in the non-verb paragraph completion included not answering number 17, which required the direct object pronoun *la*; writing *di* for number 18 (*della*); and responding with *si* in number 20, which required the indirect object pronoun *le*. While some students used acute (é) in place of grave (è) accents, this was not considered in determining whether the response was correct or incorrect.

***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 should always take time to read very carefully the instructions on how to answer the two sets of paragraph completions. It is also wise to refer students to [www.collegeboard.com/apstudents](http://www.collegeboard.com/apstudents) so that they can view published examples, along with instructions, for each part of the exam. Teachers should also provide students with copies of the scoring guidelines, which explain the criteria for correct responses.

Students should read the entire passage before writing any answers in the blanks so that they understand the content and the context of the passage. Once they begin to fill in the blanks, they should reread the entire sentence prior to writing the answer. Finally, students should proofread their responses.

In the verb paragraph completion, even if the answer is identical to the form in parentheses—that is, an infinitive, as in blank numbers 5 and 9—the student must write that verb form (infinitive) in the blank. Failure to write anything or a statement such as *non cambia* or “the same” means that the answer will be scored as incorrect. In the non-verb paragraph completion, students should not write *niente* or the equivalent because the item will be scored as incorrect. In this regard, students should be reminded that a blank will always be scored as incorrect in both tasks. Encourage students to fill in the blank with an educated guess. This will give them a chance at a correct answer because, in this part of the exam, no points are deducted for an incorrect response. It is

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\* The Standard Group does not include students who hear or speak Italian at home or who have lived for one month or more in a country where Italian is the native language. Decisions on cutoff scores are based on the Standard Group.

important that students look for contextual clues in order to provide a correct response in both passages.

Students should place graphic accents directly over the vowel, not next to it or near it. Unclear placement of accents or missing accents make the answer incorrect even if everything else is correct. Students should print clearly. If it is not possible to distinguish an *o* from an *a*, for example, the answer will be scored as incorrect. Other reasons for marking a response as incorrect include incorrect placement of an apostrophe, incorrect spelling, more than one response, and not writing in Italian.

In order to help students complete this part of the exam in the time allotted (5 minutes for each passage), teachers should create practice sets for both tasks by choosing passages from authentic readings. These exercises should be timed so that students can write answers under actual exam conditions. It would also be helpful to prepare additional examples that students could practice at home. Even though there may be more than one acceptable answer for a blank, teachers should instruct students to provide only one answer to reduce the possibility of error.

Based on the errors in this exam, students can benefit from grammatical practice in the following areas.

#### *Verbs*

- Subject–verb agreement
- Review of tenses, especially present indicative, *passato prossimo*, *imperfetto*, and the subjunctive tenses
- Review of the use of *avere* and *essere* with the *passato prossimo*
- Sequencing of tenses
- Use of the infinitive
- Irregular verbs
- Placement of accents over vowels
- Correct spelling

#### *Non-verbs*

- Noun–adjective agreement
- Articulated prepositions
- Definite and indefinite articles
- Possessive adjectives
- Demonstrative adjectives and pronouns
- Clitic pronouns (direct, indirect, *ci*, *ne*, double-object constructions)
- Placement of accent marks over vowels
- Correct spelling

## Writing Task 3: Composition

### ***What was the intent of this question?***

This task tests students' ability to write a formal composition. It comprises a single prompt, which identifies a topic, details aspects of the topic to address, and specifies that the response should be justified with some specific examples. Students are allotted 30 minutes to write a composition of about 150 words. They must produce a well-organized and coherent composition, as if they were submitting it to an Italian writing contest. The work receives a single holistic score based on organization and clarity, range and appropriateness of vocabulary, grammatical accuracy, and spelling. This year students were asked to compare life today with that of their parents' generation, discussing the changes and considering how life has improved or become worse.

### ***How well did students perform on this question?***

The mean score for the Standard Group was 3.29 out of a possible 9 points. The mean score for the Total Group was 3.77. This task proved very difficult for most students. Many were unprepared to write a formal composition with clarity and accuracy.

### ***What were common student errors or omissions?***

The following were some of the common errors found in student compositions. Teachers should remind students to check their work for these potential problems:

- Failure to address the prompt directly and completely, including its various parts
- Failure to use transitional elements within and between paragraphs
- Lack of adjective–noun agreement
- Lack of subject–verb agreement
- Problems with articulated prepositions
- Lack of rich vocabulary and idioms (frequent repetition of basic and common vocabulary items)
- Failure to use complex structures (noun clauses, relative clauses, adverbial clauses, comparative and superlative structures, and so forth)
- Use of informal language (the student is instructed to write a composition for submission to an Italian writing contest)
- Failure to use the subjunctive
- Failure to use graphic accents
- Failure to use appropriate paragraph structure
- Interference from another language

Although some students used acute (é) in place of grave (è) accents, or vice versa, this was not considered in determining the score.

### ***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?***

It is important that students read the instructions and the question very carefully before beginning to write. They should also spend some time outlining the composition prior to writing it. Wise

teachers refer students to [www.collegeboard.com/apstudents](http://www.collegeboard.com/apstudents) so that they can view published examples, along with instructions, for each part of the exam.

Students need periodic in-class practice in writing a composition that reflects the actual exam conditions (30 minutes, on a specific topic, following AP Exam instructions). They also need to develop a sense of how much time it will take to write a 150-word composition. Appropriate materials are available on AP Central® (<http://apcentral.collegeboard.com>), namely, the sample questions in the *AP Italian Language and Culture Course Description* and the free-response questions from the 2006 exam. Teachers can also prepare composition assignments similar in form to those on the exam as homework practice. It is important to familiarize students with the scoring guidelines for this question (also available on AP Central) so that they know how their compositions will be evaluated; it would be useful to post the guidelines prominently in the classroom so that students may consult them. Finally, students should develop a habit of giving their composition a final proofreading for common errors in subject–verb agreement, noun–adjective agreement, use of the subjunctive, placement of accents, spelling, use of transitional elements, appropriate use of paragraphs, and so forth, as well as to ensure that their composition has stayed on topic.

“Free voluntary reading,” a practice proposed by Stephen Krashen, a second language acquisition theorist, is one way for students to improve their vocabulary, spelling, grammar, and facility with composition format (paragraphs, use of transitional elements). For this reason, students should be encouraged to read examples of good Italian prose. Although such materials may not be available in some school libraries, certain public libraries and almost all college and university libraries are good sources. Also, teachers can refer students to appropriate Web sites for examples of well-written prose. Likewise, instructors may want to reproduce appropriate examples of Italian prose for students to read and review.

## **Culture Task: Composition**

### ***What was the intent of this question?***

This task tests students’ ability to write a formal composition on a cultural subject. It comprises a single prompt which identifies a cultural topic, directs students to select an example of that topic and explain what makes it significant, and specifies that the responses should be justified with references to specific cultural information. Students are allotted 30 minutes to write a well-organized and coherent composition of about 150 words, as if they were submitting it to an Italian writing contest. The response receives two holistic scores, one for content (i.e., cultural knowledge) and one for language usage, based on organization and clarity, range and appropriateness of vocabulary, grammatical accuracy, and spelling. In calculating the total score, content is weighted 80 percent and language, 20 percent.

The *AP Language and Culture Course Description* lists five general areas from which the composition’s specific topic may be taken. This year students had to choose an Italian industry, describe at least two different aspects that make it important, and explain why. Furthermore, students had to justify their opinions with at least one cultural reference, but they could also cite personal experiences and class discussions. Finally, the prompt included examples of industries, aspects of industries, and types of cultural references; students could choose from these examples or use their own.

### ***How well did students perform on this question?***

As indicated in the table below, the language scores for this composition were very similar to the scores on the Writing Composition question in part A; this is to be expected, as the scoring guidelines are very similar. Note that although the mean content score is higher than the mean language score, these two numbers should not be directly compared because they are based on completely separate scoring guidelines. Nevertheless, they do indicate that, on average, students were slightly better able to meet the standards established for the content dimension than for the language dimension of the composition.

	<b>Standard Group</b>	<b>Total Group</b>	<b>Possible Points</b>
<b>Content</b>	4.35	4.64	9
<b>Language</b>	3.47	3.87	9

### ***What were common student errors or omissions?***

Some common errors and omissions in the compositions included the following:

#### *Content*

- Failure to choose a single industry
- Failure to talk about at least two different aspects that make the industry important with an explanation of why this is so—that is, an interpretation of these aspects rather than a simple enumeration of factual information
- Failure to present a synthesis of cultural information
- Failure to present relevant cultural information
- Failure to cite a cultural work in support of statements

#### *Language*

- Failure to write in paragraph form
- Failure to use transitional elements to connect paragraphs and sentences within paragraphs
- Failure to use appropriate register (the student is instructed to write a composition intended for submission to an Italian writing contest)
- Failure to use varied vocabulary (frequent repetition of certain basic and common vocabulary items)
- Spelling errors
- Failure to use complex structures (subordinate clauses, noun clauses, relative clauses, adverbial clauses, and so forth)
- Interference from another language

Although some students used acute (é) in place of grave (è) accents, or vice versa, this was not considered in determining the score.

***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?***

See the response to this question under “Writing Task 3: Composition,” above.

Additionally, it is important to remind students that the culture composition will be scored twice—once for content and a second time for language—by two different Readers. For this reason, students should develop a habit of giving their composition a final proofreading focusing on both of these dimensions. First, they should check for accuracy of the cultural content and interpretation of these facts and make sure that they have answered the question completely. Second, they should recheck the composition for potential problem areas such as subject–verb and noun–adjective agreement, use of the subjunctive, placement of accents, spelling errors, use of transitional elements, repetition of certain words throughout the composition, appropriate paragraphs, and so forth.

Finally, students should learn to cite cultural references in their practice compositions on cultural subjects. This would include film, literary sources, newspapers, and the like. Being able to do this presupposes that they spend time—likely both in and out of class—identifying, discussing, and interpreting what the information in such cultural products implicitly and explicitly reveals about the culture of Italy.

## **Speaking Task 1: Story Narration**

### ***What was the intent of this question?***

This task tests the ability to narrate orally an informal story containing a beginning, middle, and end. It comprises a series of pictures that depict a story. Students are allotted 2 minutes to prepare and make notes and 2 minutes to narrate a complete story based on the pictures as if they were telling the story to a friend. The response receives a single holistic score based on fluency, ability to narrate, grammatical accuracy, range of vocabulary, pronunciation, and completeness of response.

This year’s picture sequence showed a group of three young adults going to a concert at the Piazza del Popolo. When they arrived at the concert locale, they discovered that they had lost their tickets. The ticket office was closed, so they sat at a café instead.

### ***How well did students perform on this question?***

The mean score for the Standard Group was 2.89 out of a possible 6 points. The mean score for the Total Group was 3.30. As compared with the writing questions and the language dimension of the culture question, students were somewhat more prepared to meet the standards established for this speaking activity.

### ***What were common student errors or omissions?***

Overall, students at the lower end of the scoring range failed to tell a complete story, failed to use transitional elements, had very limited vocabulary, lacked fluency, had interference from another language, finished before 2 minutes elapsed, and made frequent grammatical errors even in basic structures.

Some common errors or omissions were the following:

- Failure to tell a story with a beginning, middle, and end
- Sequential description of the pictures instead of a narrative
- Repetition of certain basic and common vocabulary items
- Very long pauses
- Failure to use transitional elements
- Lack of fluency
- Interference from another language
- Failure to use complex grammatical structures (subordination, noun clauses, relative clauses, adverbial clauses, and so forth)
- Basic grammatical errors (subject–verb agreement, noun–adjective agreement, inappropriate selection of auxiliary verb in the *passato prossimo*, and so forth)
- Sketchy narrative that lacked detail

***Based on your experience of student responses at the AP Reading, what message would you like to send to teachers that might help them improve the performance of their students on the exam?***

Although students speak in class, they may not have experience with sustained narration, particularly as based on a sequence of six pictures such as these. For this reason, they will need to practice this part of the exam in class under conditions similar to those of the actual exam administration. Students tend to describe the pictures instead of narrating a story with a beginning, middle, and end. Before beginning to speak, each student has 2 minutes to make notes and prepare the narration. This is a very important preparatory step for providing a complete oral narrative, and it should be incorporated in all practice sessions. Teachers may obtain sequences of pictures from AP Central for practice materials. This activity, and all AP exam questions, should be practiced from the beginning of the year and throughout the entire course. It should be part of a complete set of diverse speaking activities, as all sorts of oral exercises will enhance students' ability in this area.

It is also very important that students have familiarity with the equipment to be used during the actual administration of the exam so that they will be able to use it correctly. Prior to the administration, all of the equipment should be inspected to make sure that it is working properly. At the Reading, many responses were difficult or impossible to score owing to recording problems. It is vital that student responses are recorded properly, regardless of whether cassettes or digital recordings are used.

- Prior to the exam, teachers should work with the AP Coordinator, school authorities, and proctors to ensure that there will be no disturbing noises while students are recording. Students must be seated far enough apart so as not to distract each other while responding; spacing requirements are detailed in the *AP Coordinator's Manual* (available on AP Central).
- It is important that proctors know how to administer the speaking section of the exam. Teachers and proctors will find it helpful to review together the relevant pages in the *AP Coordinator's Manual* and *AP Examination Instructions* book (part of each school's exam shipments) well in advance of the administration. Problems this year included recording at the wrong speed, recording on the wrong track, and recordings cut off in midresponse.

- Additionally, teachers must impress on students that stopping and starting their machines while recording in order to give themselves time to think and formulate an answer is not allowed and could result in scores being delayed because of a suspected security violation. Students should follow directions and start, pause, or stop the recorder only when told to do so. Proctors should never pause or stop the playing of the master CD.

## **Speaking Task 2: Conversation**

### ***What was the intent of this question?***

This task tests students' ability to engage in spoken conversation. It comprises a statement identifying an interlocutor and conversation topic, a practice question, and five scored questions. Students are allotted 20 seconds to speak at each turn in the conversation. Each of the five responses receives a holistic score based on the criteria outlined in the task directions; all five scores count equally in calculating the total score. Students are scored on their ability to respond to each question fully and appropriately and to express themselves fluently and correctly. Credit is deducted if the answer is too short.

This year's conversation consisted of a series of exchanges with an Italian journalist concerning the study of languages. The first four questions asked why it is important to study another language, why the student decided to study Italian instead of another language, which aspects of Italian culture interested the student most, and if the student could study in Italy, where would he or she go? Finally, students were instructed to ask the journalist some questions about his experience with other languages.

### ***How well did students perform on this question?***

The mean score for the Standard Group was 15.03 out of a possible 30 points. The mean score for the Total Group was 17.16. As compared with the writing questions and the language dimension of the culture question, students were somewhat more prepared to meet the standards established for this speaking activity.

### ***What were common student errors or omissions?***

Students who received lower scores generally exhibited the following:

- Failure to understand the question
- Failure to answer the question completely
- Frequent hesitation
- Failure to use the entire 20 seconds to give a complete response
- Limited vocabulary and idioms
- Errors in basic grammatical structures, including in the use of the auxiliary verbs *avere* and *essere* with the past participle and mistakes in subject–verb and noun–adjective agreement
- Interference from another language
- Failure to use complex structures (subordination, noun clauses, relative clauses, adverbial clauses, and so forth)
- Failure to use the appropriate register, especially in question 5, in which students must address questions directly to the journalist

***Based on your experience of student responses at the AP Reading, what message would you like to send to teachers that might help them improve the performance of their students on the exam?***

As is the case with the story narration, it is important that students rehearse this part of the exam with the equipment that will be used during its administration. (See also the suggestions for avoiding recording problems listed under this question in the immediately preceding section.)

Students need to hear a wide variety of male and female voices to be prepared for this part of the exam. Appropriate clips from various media (film, songs, opera, television, radio) would be useful in and out of the classroom. Such materials may also be located on the Internet, at movie rental stores, on television, and at public or university libraries. Students should have practice responding to a series of five prompts, including ones that require them to initiate an exchange, such as by asking a question. Students need to listen carefully to the prompt and say something relevant in response—even if it is brief—so that they will receive at least some credit for each of the five turns in the conversation. Silence, “*non so*,” responses in English, or a series of paralinguistic utterances such as “ah” or “um” will result in a score of 0. They also should develop a sense of how to respond in 20 seconds. This sort of practice needs to occur throughout the academic year.

The speaking component of the AP Italian Language and Culture course should not be solely focused on the conversational aspect. Rather, a variety of activities should be introduced into the curriculum—for example, interviews and debates. Students must be prepared to respond spontaneously to different situations. This will also improve fluency and confidence in their own linguistic abilities. At the same time, instructors need to pay attention to verb tenses, increased vocabulary, and the like.