



Student Performance Q&A:

2006 AP® Psychology Free-Response Questions

The following comments on the 2006 free-response questions for AP® Psychology were written by the Chief Reader, Jane Halonen of the University of Western Florida in Pensacola. 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 designed to test students' in-depth knowledge of research strategies, regarded by most psychologists as the heart of critical thinking training in this course. Students had to describe three different research methods to study the effects of vitamin "J" on memory: experimentation, correlational study, and case study. Students had to explain the distinguishing features of the basic approach and offer an advantage and disadvantage of each method.

How well did students perform on this question?

Students performed very well: the mean score was 4.83 out of a possible 9 points, which scoring managers at the AP Reading partially attributed to a loose rather than a tight scoring guideline. The distribution of scores was fairly normal.

What were common student errors or omissions?

Students often revealed that their genuine understanding of research methods was insufficiently crisp to provide true distinguishing features for each approach. These essays tended to be peppered with terminology that was not always relevant, as if students knew the terms but could not figure out which terms went with which method.

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 central importance of research methods virtually guarantees that a substantial number of questions on future AP Psychology Exams will deal with them. That does not mean that every year there will be a research question, but it behooves teachers to ensure that students do not get shortchanged in the time and processes invested in this important area.

Question 2

What was the intent of this question?

This question was designed to tap broad knowledge across the various subsections of psychology. From various chapters in an introductory text, the AP Psychology Development Committee selected eight concepts applicable to buying a car. The concepts represented varying degrees of difficulty. The question emphasized students' ability to generate examples rather than definitions in an attempt to measure higher level function.

How well did students perform on this question?

The mean score was 1.80 out of a possible 8 points, with a positive skew in the distribution, so performance was somewhat disappointing. There were some scores of 8 but not as many as hoped. Feedback from high school AP teachers has suggested several explanations:

1. Eight concepts of varying difficulty may be too challenging to describe in the time allotted because of the cognitive gear-shifting need to accomplish the task.
2. "Central route to persuasion" is a term that is not represented in all introductory textbooks (although the Psychology Development Committee did find it in a sufficient number of textbooks during the exam development process).
3. "Rationalization" appears to have fallen out of favor as a standard concept in introductory psychology. The committee thought this would be a relatively easy term for students, but the number of omissions and errors in responses suggest otherwise.

What were common student errors or omissions?

Readers were surprised not just by the low scores but by the pattern of the low scores. There did not appear to be any specific research concept that scored inappropriately low. This pattern suggests that the nature of content coverage can be challenging for high school teachers because even those with the best skills and intentions might elect to leave out a concept that could end up on the AP Exam. Although the exam was statistically configured so that missing one term would not necessarily harm the likelihood of getting a good score, high school teachers said that the number of items that stumped students was potentially demoralizing.

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?

Remind students to read the question carefully. Some students lost time by defining terms before getting to the real task of generating relevant examples.