



Student Performance Q&A: 2001 AP[®] French Free-Response Questions

The following comments are provided by the Chief Faculty Consultant regarding the 2001 free-response questions for AP French. *They are intended to assist AP workshop consultants 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. Consultants are encouraged to use their expertise to create strategies for teachers to improve student performance in specific areas.

FRENCH LITERATURE

What was intended by the question?

Analysis: A close reading of the passage would be the general answer to both sub-questions.

Sub-question 1 asks students to discuss how Pierre's feelings are described during the family meal and show how Maupassant makes the reader sense what is not explicitly stated in the text regarding Pierre's feelings.

Sub-question 2 asks students to a) analyze the attitude of the mother and b) the effect of the mother's words on Pierre.

Essay: The student is asked to choose a non-specified number of characters whose love encounters obstacles, to identify the nature of these obstacles and to analyze their effect on the characters' behavior.

How well did the students perform?

Students performed remarkably well and were able to respond to challenging questions in a limited period of time.

What were common errors or omissions?

Analysis: In sub-question 1, students tended to list Pierre's feelings rather than describe or analyze them. They also had difficulty in finding ways of talking about "what the writer does not say." That part of the question was particularly challenging.

Essay: A common error is to give a plot summary rather than focus on the specifics of the question especially concerning the "effect" of the obstacles to love on the characters' behavior.

What are the general content areas/skills that need improvement?

Students are urged to read the instructions carefully. They need to learn to break the question down, understand exactly what is being asked and organize their response in a coherent manner. They should organize their response around pertinent and persuasive examples. In the case of the analysis, they need to focus on the passage. Obviously, in the case of a prose passage, the student may support interpretation by pertinent reference to the book as a whole or to other parts of the book, but the analysis should begin with the selected passage and remain close to it.

What can teachers do to improve performance in specific problem areas?

For the *Analysis*, it seems that teachers put more emphasis on poetry. They should train students to analyze all aspects of prose; i.e., narrative, interior monologues, dialogues, etc. Select various types of passages and have students analyze them in a comprehensive manner.

For the *Essay*, help student focus on the question being asked. Have them underline key words in the formulation of the question and make sure that they are all covered in the response.

Generally, students need practice selecting pertinent and persuasive examples to support their arguments.

FRENCH LANGUAGE: 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. 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 fill-ins were very good this year, with only one question presenting the possibility of more than one choice (question 19 – *arriveront* or *seront arrivés*). Unfortunately, there was also one question (question 5) where, in addition to the intended "function" word (*dont*), one might justify one of several adverbs, such as "maintenant" or "aujourd'hui."

How well did the students perform?

Students performed better than last year but continue to miss many of the seemingly obvious answers. The verb forms were less complicated than last year, and the paragraphs were clear and well constructed.

What were common errors or omissions?

Students don't always read directions carefully and so they use two-word answers or they don't make proper agreements with the verbs. It is obvious in some cases that they have not read the paragraph entirely and thought about it before beginning their answer. In the function words, the common errors are the obvious culprits – relative pronoun *dont* and relative pronouns after a preposition. In the verb section, it was subjunctives and the future (or future perfect) in a future context that posed problems.

What are the general content areas/ skills that need improvement?

This year's verbs tenses were clear and commonplace. Similarly, the function words were very straightforward. Students should be able to handle these fill-ins better than they do.

What can teachers do to improve performance in specific problem areas?

Students need 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 them to practice.

FRENCH LANGUAGE: ESSAY**What was intended by the question?**

The essay question 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 required them to air their views on the desirability of the progressive reduction of cultural differences as a consequence of globalization.

How well did the students perform?

As usual, student performance ranged from very poor to outstanding. Essay content might have produced an impression of greater mediocrity than usual this year because of the topic. Many students ended up expressing the same limited range of stereotypical ideas in response to the question.

What were common errors or omissions?

- Failure to address the topic as presented.
- Needless repetitions (of ideas, of vocabulary, of whole statements).
- Inappropriate insertion into the essay of text taken from the question.
- Inappropriate use of memorized French expressions.
- Mistakes of grammar and usage.

What are the general content areas/ skills that need improvement?

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, anecdote, 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
- produce a sense of idiomatic French, rather than the impression that one is reading something clumsily translated into French.

Are there patterns of errors that appear year after year?

The usual culprits: subject-verb agreement; mistakes of noun gender (“toute la monde” quickly becomes tiresome); 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 to express “the whole world”).

What can teachers do to improve performance in specific problem areas?

Persuade students that they must *read* a lot of French if they are going to learn to *write* it correctly. 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 a Word 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!).

FRENCH LANGUAGE: SPEAKING

What was intended by the question?

Since 1998, the format for both parts of the exam has consisted of questions that go from concrete (based on a series of pictures) to abstract (requiring a more general or personal answer). There is always a transition question that requires some type of speculation (“Que feriez-vous si...”) and at least one two-part question (Pourquoi?). One of the questions often asks for pros and cons of a situation or a comparison.

How well did the students perform?

There is always a mix of good and poor responses to this question type, and this year's scores also seemed to be well distributed across the scale. The students seemed to understand the questions well, except for their confusion (mostly at the lower ability levels) with the word “chance.”

What were common errors or omissions?

Students overlook two part questions, 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 over explanations or comments. They also tend to give enumerations and lists for questions asking for comparisons or pros and cons. If they stumble with a particular vocabulary word, they seldom rely on circumlocutions or periphrases to get out of a bind.

What can teachers do to improve their students' performance on the exam?

During exam review 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 that 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.”
- Help students practice circumlocutions and periphrases when building up vocabulary.