



## Student Performance Q&A:

### 2004 AP® French Language Free-Response Questions

The following comments on the 2004 free-response questions for AP® French Language were written by the Chief Reader, John Lambeth of Washington and Lee University in Lexington, Virginia. 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.

#### Part A: Fill-Ins

##### *What was the intent of these questions?*

The French language fill-ins are intended to test students' grammar skills, and they offer a more objective measure than the language essay itself. There are 30 items in this section: 15 "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 for each blank.

##### *How well did students perform on these questions?*

The fill-ins worked well this year. The Standard Group's\* mean score for the function words was 9.0 out of a possible 15 points (higher than last year); its mean score for the verbs was 6.0 (slightly lower than last year). The Total Group's mean score for the function words was 9.4; its mean score for the verbs was 6.2. As usual, students performed better on the function word section than on the verb section. The verb forms were sometimes complicated, but the paragraphs were clear and well constructed. It is still surprising to me how many of the obvious answers students miss.

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\*The Standard Group does not include students who speak the language at home or who have lived for more than two months in a country where French is the native language. Decisions on cut-off scores are based on this group.

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

Students did not always read the directions carefully, and so they used two-word answers to function word questions or they did not make proper agreements with the verbs. It was obvious in some cases that they had not read the paragraph entirely or thought about it before beginning their answer.

In the function words section, the common errors were the obvious culprits: relative pronouns. In the verb section, it was subjunctives and “if” clauses (particularly the counterfactual in Number 27) and the imperfect of *devoir* followed by the subjunctive in Numbers 28 and 29 that posed problems.

***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 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 students have been reading and leave out certain verbs or function words so they can practice filling them in.

Teachers should also encourage their students to read the paragraphs carefully before filling in the blanks, make sure that they use only one word in the function word section, and carefully check for agreements in the verb section.

**Part A: Essay**

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

This 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 discuss whether or not celebrities have a social responsibility to the public, whether they should behave in an exemplary manner.

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

As usual, student performance ranged from very poor to outstanding. The question was quite clear and allowed students at all levels to demonstrate their competency (or lack thereof). Students generally performed better than last year. The mean score for the Standard Group was 4.5 out of a possible nine points; the mean score for the Total Group was 4.7.

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

The most common errors included the failure to address the topic as presented, needless repetitions (e.g., of ideas, vocabulary, whole statements), and inappropriate use of memorized French expressions. Students sometimes failed to answer the question that had been asked, writing either about the influence that famous people have on others or about the responsibility that famous people have toward the public but without providing convincing examples. Readers found the usual grammar and usage mistakes.

***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?***

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 allusions to personal experience, news items, anecdotes, and so on;
- make appropriate use of rhetorical questions, “connecting” expressions (e.g., *d’ailleurs*, *néanmoins*, *en plus*, *pourtant*, *à cause de*), and the like; and
- produce a sense of idiomatic French, which will help avoid the impression of reading something that has been clumsily translated into French.

Teachers should persuade students that they must *read* a lot of French if they are going to learn to write correctly in French, and they should provide students with opportunities to *review the basics* of grammar and usage, using *authentic texts*.

## **Part B: Speaking**

### ***What was the intent of these questions?***

Since 1998 the format for both parts of the speaking exam has consisted of questions that progress from the concrete (based on a series of pictures) to the personal or the abstract. The first question encourages the use of appropriate vocabulary and proper sequencing of events with attendant terminology like *d’abord*, *ensuite*, *et puis*, *enfin* (in this exam, to describe the situation of a teenager who promises to be home from a party at midnight but who loses track of time and returns home very late, much to the consternation of his parents). The second question personalizes what students see in the picture sequence (in this exam, by asking whether they typically like to go out with a group of friends or just with one particular friend). The third question pushes toward more abstract expression based on an aspect of the picture sequence (in this exam, whether or not parents should have rules for their children).

The second picture sequence usually sets up a comparison or a contrast. This year Question 4 asked students to explain what attributes one should have to become an astronaut or a teacher. Question 5 was more speculative, asking students to say what is likely to influence them the most in their choice of a career.

### ***How well did students perform on these questions?***

There is always a mix of good and poor responses, and the scores seem to spread across the scale; but students tend to do well on the speaking part of the exam. This year they seemed to understand the questions well. For Questions 1 through 3, the mean score for the Standard Group was 8.9 out of a possible 15 points; the mean score for the Total Group was 9.4. For Questions 4 through 5, the mean score for the Standard Group was 6.0 out of a possible 10 points; the mean score for the Total Group was 6.3. The total mean speaking score for the Standard Group was 14.8 out of a possible 25 points; for the Total Group it was 15.7.

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

The most common errors Readers found in scoring the exam were that students did not pick up on the tenses asked in the questions (they often relied on the use of the present tense), and they tended to favor descriptions rather than explanations or comments. They also tended to give enumerations and lists when the questions asked for comparisons or pros and cons. If they

stumbled on a particular vocabulary word, they seldom relied on circumlocutions or periphrases to get out of a bind.

***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?***

During training sessions, teachers should:

- help students to get used to using the allotted 60 seconds to the fullest;
- tell students to look out for two-part questions;
- discourage students from giving lists of vocabulary when answering questions;
- practice the exam format with students, using the required equipment 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 Questions 3 and 5;
- teach students to use words of transition as well as comparative and superlative structures;
- practice *si* (conditional) clauses with students;
- teach students the difference between *commentez*, *racontez*, *contrastez*, *décrivez*, and so on; and
- help students practice circumlocutions and periphrases when building up their vocabulary.