



Student Performance Q&A: 2005 AP® French Language Free-Response Questions

The following comments on the 2005 free-response questions for AP® French Language were written by the Chief Reader, James Day of the University of South Carolina in Columbia. 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 this question?

The French Language fill-ins are intended to test students' command of grammar, vocabulary, and usage. These questions offer a more objective measure than the essay itself. There are 30 items in this section: 15 "function" words (pronouns and prepositions) and 15 verb forms. The blanks that must be filled in with a missing word or verb structure appear in short paragraphs that are highly contextualized. Considerable care is taken to create contexts that allow only a single possible answer.

How well did students perform on this question?

The function words appeared to be more challenging than usual. The Standard Group's* mean score for the function words was 6.12 out of a possible 15 points, whereas its mean score for the verb forms was 8.53 out of a possible 15 points. The Total Group's mean score for the function words was 6.58 out of a possible 15 points; its mean score for the verb forms was 8.65 out of a possible 15 points. In more typical years, students achieve lower scores on the verb fill-ins than on the function words.

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

What were common student errors or omissions?

As the instructions for the verb fill-ins indicated, spelling and “accents and agreement must be correct for the answer to be considered correct.” In question 27 the given infinitive *dîner* clearly had an accented letter. Some students wrote the correct conjugated form of *dîner* but lost the entire point because they failed to include the obligatory accent. A few of the verb questions (17–20 and 24–26) contained pronouns, and students were sometimes unsure how to include them. For several questions, even though pronoun placement should not have been difficult, exam Readers gave full credit for a correct verb that was not accompanied by the pronoun.

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?

Teachers should incorporate the following practices into their teaching strategies.

- Review verb forms, pronouns, and prepositions at regular intervals.
- Stress the importance of accents as part of spelling.
- Give students plenty of French prose to read.
- Comment on verbs and function words when working on listening exercises.
- Retype a page from a reading assignment, replacing several function words with blanks and changing some of the conjugated verbs into infinitives. Ask students to supply the function words and write the conjugated form of the verb (“fill-in-the-blank exercise” = *un exercice à trous*).
- Encourage students to read the *whole paragraph* before starting to write in the words.

Part A: Essay

What was the intent of this question?

The essay question allows students to demonstrate the level at which they can express themselves in written French while addressing a specified topic. Shrewd students show what they do know, while concealing what they are not sure of. This year’s question directed students to comment on the “generation gap” phenomenon and to suggest ways to improve understanding across generations.

How well did students perform on this question?

This year’s topic worked well for students at many different levels. Indeed, enthusiasm for the topic resulted in essays that were longer than they are in an average year. The mean score for the Standard Group was 4.56 out of a possible 9 points; the mean score for the Total Group was 4.76 out of a possible 9 points.

What were common student errors or omissions?

Some students inserted into their prose word strings they had taken from the question, and this produced awkwardness. Not all students heeded the instructions, which called for *specific examples* in support of their ideas.

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 be taught to:

- organize their remarks clearly (e.g., introduction, body, conclusion);
- avoid a conclusion that merely restates the introduction;
- make effective use of examples (e.g., news items, personal experiences, anecdotes);
- use connecting expressions (e.g., *d'ailleurs*, *néanmoins*, *en plus*, *pourtant*, *à cause de*), rhetorical questions, parallel constructions, antithesis, conditional sentences, and so on; and
- strive for a sense of idiomatic French while avoiding prose that sounds like something that has been badly translated from English.

Teachers should:

- encourage students to *read* a lot of French in order to acquire a sense of French prose, and
- provide opportunities to *review the basics of grammar and usage*, using authentic texts.

Part B: Speaking

What was the intent of this question?

On both parts of the speaking exam, questions progress from the concrete (based on a series of pictures) to the personal or the abstract. This year the first question encouraged the use of apt vocabulary and proper sequencing of events with attendant terminology (*d'abord*, *ensuite*, *et puis*, *enfin*) to describe the situation of a boy who found a pocketbook full of money. Resisting the urge to spend it on himself, he did the right thing, took it to the police station, and was rewarded by the pocketbook's owner. The second question personalized the honesty issue by asking students what they would do if they observed a friend doing something dishonest. The third question reached a higher level of abstraction by asking students to comment on the importance (or unimportance) of honesty in general.

The second picture sequence called for comparison and contrast. Question 4 had students compare a party involving pizza and television with a movie theater experience. Question 5 was more personalized, asking students to explain their preference for their favorite movie genre.

How well did students perform on this question?

Despite some challenging vocabulary (e.g., *se conduit, quelconque, genre*), most students found it possible to do rather well on the speaking questions. The Standard Group's mean score for all of part B was 14.38 out of a possible 25 points (8.52 out of a possible 15 points for the first three questions and 5.86 out of a possible 10 points for the last two questions). The Total Group's mean score for all of part B was 15.3 out of a possible 25 points (9.1 out of a possible 15 points for the first three questions and 6.2 out of a possible 10 points for the last two questions).

What were common student errors or omissions?

Typical problems included failing to respond with the appropriate verb tense (the present tense was noticeably overused); using description when explanation or comment was called for; resorting to listing when comparison was called for; and failing to find an alternative expression when *le mot juste* did not quickly come to mind.

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?

When coaching their class for the speaking part of the exam, teachers should:

- advise students to use the allotted 60 seconds per question to the fullest;
- warn students to watch for two-part questions;
- urge students to avoid 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 (practice with synonyms and antonyms is useful for questions that ask about the pros and cons of an issue);
- provide practice with more abstract types of answers, in preparation for questions such as number 3 and number 5 on this year's exam;
- 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;
- help students practice circumlocutions and periphrases when building up vocabulary; and
- urge students to minimize their use of *quelque chose comme ça* and similar expressions that produce a sense of vagueness.