



Student Performance Q&A: 2003 AP[®] French Literature Free-Response Questions

The following comments on the 2003 free-response questions for AP[®] French Literature were written by the Chief Reader, John Lambeth of Washington and Lee University. 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: *Analyse*

What was the intent of this question?

This section asks students two directed questions that require a close reading of a text they have read and discussed in class during the year. The text this year was a fable by Jean de la Fontaine called “Le Loup et l’Agneau.” The first subquestion often asks students to discuss a theme or to examine rhetorical strategies. This year students were asked to analyze the wolf’s arguments and his attitude in the poem. The second subquestion typically asks students to examine literary technique. This year the question directed them to analyze the techniques La Fontaine uses to characterize the lamb.

How well did students perform on this question?

Students performed quite well. They seemed to understand the text itself well and they understood what they were supposed to do. The first subquestion was apparently easier for students, since the arrogance and the bad faith of the wolf are evident. The second subquestion presented more problems since it required more technical knowledge of literary techniques. The content mean score was 6.7 out of a possible 10 points. The language mean score was 3.66 out of a possible five points.

What were common student errors or omissions?

The most common error was, as always, students failing to analyze the questions so as to respond coherently and on topic. Another common problem every year is the lack of organization in student responses. Students receiving the mid-range scores typically spent most of their time paraphrasing the text. The first subquestion asked them to analyze the wolf’s arguments, but the mid-range students simply restated the wolf’s arguments without any analysis. The second subquestion forced them toward a discussion of literary techniques, but it was obvious that many of the students have a very limited knowledge of literary techniques.

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 practice close reading techniques during the year to properly prepare them for this part of the exam. They need to learn to stay within the text (which is easier when the text is a poem as it was this year), and they need practice identifying and describing rhetorical strategies and literary techniques.

Question 2: Essai

What was the intent of this question?

The intent of this question is to see how well students can write about a literary work they have read and discussed in class during the year. Students are evaluated on their ability to organize and express their ideas in a complete and coherent essay. This year students were asked to write an essay on the theme of the family in either *Pierre et Jean* by Guy de Maupassant or in *Une si longue lettre* by Mariama Bâ.

How well did students perform on this question?

Students performed well. The family was an obvious theme in both novels and students had no trouble coming up with ideas. (About 60 percent of the students wrote on *Pierre et Jean*.) Readers are always disappointed when they find students who do not seem to have read the texts in the program and are therefore unable to respond to the questions, but these students are rare. The level of French language proficiency was quite high on this exam.

What were common student errors or omissions?

The most common error, as it is every year in this particular section, was plot summary. Another problem students had is that they did not consider the terms of the question. For instance, this year students often talked about the family as a source of support or constraint, but they did not talk about the thematic importance of the family within the novel. These essays in the mid-score range often simply described different incidents in the novel where the family either supported or limited a character. As with the analyse section of the exam, students need to organize their response better in clear paragraph structure with an introduction, a series of clear arguments, and a conclusion.

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 practice writing timed essays on the literary works in the program. They need to practice developing a quick outline so as to help them better structure their response. Readers look for specific arguments in the body of the response, but they are encouraged to score holistically. A well-organized essay that introduces a series of points, then clearly develops them, and finally summarizes them while demonstrating their importance, will leave a strong impression with the reader and help to compensate for other weaknesses in the response.