



Student Performance Q&A: 2007 AP[®] French Language Free-Response Questions

The following comments on the 2007 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 designed to assess students' command of grammar, vocabulary, and usage. Because responses to the language fill-ins are either right or wrong, they offer a more objective measure than the language essay (which, however, is more comprehensive). There are 30 items in this section: 15 "function words" (mostly pronouns and prepositions, with an occasional adverb or conjunction) 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. Ideally, a fill-in question allows for only a single correct response.

How well did students perform on this question?

Student performance on the fill-in questions was typical in 2007. For the function words, the Standard Group* achieved a mean score of 7.32 out of a possible 15 points—close to last year's mean score of 7.50. On the verb fill-ins, the 2007 Standard Group clearly outperformed the 2006 group, with a mean of 7.34 as opposed to a mean of 6.44 in 2006. Uncharacteristically, students found a few acceptable but "unintended" responses to some of the 2007 fill-in questions; they received full credit for these answers.

* 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.

What were common student errors or omissions?

No systematic errors were reported. Students with good reading skills in French and strong vocabularies were able to do well on the two fill-in question sets. The most challenging verb was probably *rester* in a context that required the past perfect tense and agreement with a feminine plural subject: *étaient restées*. Compound verbs present many opportunities to make a mistake.

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 function words and verb fill-in exercises are excellent indicators of a student's command of idiomatic French. To improve their performance on the fill-in questions, students inevitably must improve their French skills. Verb forms such as *étaient restées* are not uncommon in French: if you perform a Google™ search for the word string "*étaient restées*," you find that there are more than 100,000 Web sites where that particular verb appears at least once!

Here is one idea for improving French skills with the AP Exam fill-ins in mind: use the Internet as a vast corpus of searchable French usage examples. Teachers—and their students—could devise Internet word-string searches based on verbs or function words: "*aurait dû*," "*sachant que*," "*ayant terminé*," "*celui qui*," "*dont je lui*," "*ce qui nous*," and so on. After copying (that is, electronically cutting and pasting) authentic whole sentences that use the target structure, teachers and students could leave out a function word or reduce a conjugated verb to the infinitive form. Other students would be called on to restore the correct words or forms. Remember that when you use Google or a similar search engine, the word string being searched must be typed between quotation marks ("*ayant terminé*" for instance). Note also that there are many French literary texts online (e.g., <http://abu.cnam.fr/BIB/auteurs/maupassantg.html>), and that these searchable texts can be used to isolate authentic sentences that contain verbs or "function words" to study.

Teachers should encourage their students to read as much French as possible. For the exam itself, they should emphasize the importance of accents as part of spelling, and they should encourage students to read the whole paragraph to familiarize themselves with the context before adding the missing verbs or function 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 will show off what they do know, while concealing what they are not sure of. This year's question directed students to identify elements of a successful life.

How well did students perform on this question?

The essay question was stimulating, and even students at the lower levels were able to respond meaningfully. Few booklets contained blank or off-topic essay sections; scores of 0 or 1 were very rare. Students in the 7–8 and 9 categories tended to write more abstract answers, whereas the

lower-scoring essays were sometimes lists of accomplishments (both present and future). On the whole, essays were shorter than those of other recent exams. The mean score for the Standard Group was 4.76 out of a possible 9 points (last year's mean was 4.66).

What were common student errors or omissions?

Aside from confusion on the use of *réussi(e)* and *réussite*, there were no errors or omissions that were systematic. Inevitably, the essays displayed the usual mistakes of spelling and usage in written French (subject–verb agreement, noun–adjective agreement, etc.).

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 point out to students that their task is not to *answer* the essay question but to craft a *response* to it. The essay “question” is intended to inspire a significant writing sample in French rather than a “correct answer.” Students should be encouraged to read a lot of French and to model their writing on their reading. When writing in French, they should practice organizing their remarks clearly and logically, and they should learn to avoid a conclusion that merely restates the introduction. They need practice in making effective use of example: news items, personal experiences, or anecdotes. They should also practice the use of “connecting expressions” such as *d’ailleurs*, *néanmoins*, *en plus*, *pourtant*, *à cause de*, and so forth.

Part B: Speaking

What was the intent of these questions?

Students must give evidence of competence in dealing with various speaking tasks. On both parts of the speaking exam, questions progress from the concrete (based on a series of pictures) to the personal or the abstract. The first picture sequence in the 2007 exam (questions 1–3) required 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 group of students who arrive in Paris, expect glamour and luxury, and find themselves lodged in a rundown hotel. Subsequently, the test-takers were asked to recount a disappointing event in their personal experience and then to comment on the art of appreciating travel.

The second picture sequence (questions 4–5) invited students to contrast the marriage plans of two different young couples and then to talk about their own family’s rituals and traditions. As it turned out, more than a few students, for various reasons, had trouble relating to the young couples contemplating marriage.

How well did students perform on these questions?

The Standard Group’s mean score for the first picture sequence (questions 1–3) was 9.65 out of 15, a bit better than last year’s mean of 9.54. On the whole, students could relate to the themes in the first picture set. The mean score for the same group on questions 4–5 was 6.4 out of a possible 10, compared to last year’s mean of 6.05.

What were common student errors or omissions?

Weak students had problems with verb tenses, correct vocabulary, and pronunciation.

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 preparing students for the oral portion of the AP French Language Exam, teachers should advise them to speak for the full amount of time allowed. Teachers should also practice the exam format with their students using the *required equipment* on a regular basis; they should practice using synonyms and antonyms for questions that ask for comparisons and contrasts; and they should urge students to minimize use of "*quelque chose comme ça*" and similar expressions that produce a sense of vagueness.

Because most of us are never called on to narrate a story based on a sequence of images that have just been thrust into our hands, it would probably be worthwhile to practice with a couple of picture sets in one's native language, to get the hang of this unusual act of communication before attempting the exercise in French.

A link to an excellent article on how to teach picture sequences for the AP Exams in modern languages can be found on the AP French Language Home Page on AP Central®. Picture sets from past exams are available on the AP French Language Exam Page, also on AP Central.