



Student Performance Q&A:

2007 AP[®] Italian Language and Culture Free-Response Questions

The following comments on the 2007 free-response questions for AP[®] Italian Language and Culture were written by the Chief Reader, Frank Nuessel of the University of Louisville in Kentucky. 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.

Writing: Paragraph Completion (Verbs and Non-Verbs)

What was the intent of these tasks?

This part of the exam comprises two separate passages from authentic Italian sources. Each passage includes 10 blanks for students to fill in, and both tasks require that students focus on Italian grammar. The first task addresses verbs, and the second concentrates on elements other than verbs.

Verbs

The first task assesses the ability to identify and write verbs correctly. It consists of a passage containing 10 blanks that provides a specific context; an infinitive verb is given for each blank. Students are allotted five minutes total to write an appropriate form of each verb. It is important to read the entire passage carefully and to use the contextual clues in the passage to determine the appropriate verb form. The response for each of the blanks is scored individually and must be completely correct to receive credit; all 10 scores count equally in calculating the total score. Depending on the tense of the verb and whether or not it is reflexive, correct answers may contain between one and three words. The 2008–2010 *Italian Language and Culture Course Description* provides an illustrative but not exhaustive list of the verb forms that may be evaluated in this task; of course, not all of these forms appear in any one passage. Among those included in this year's selection were indicative and subjunctive verb forms, present tense, future tense, *passato prossimo*, *imperfetto*, and infinitival and gerundial forms. The passage was about the first three women to graduate from the Accademia Ufficiali di Modena.

Non-Verbs

The second task tests the ability to identify and correctly write words other than verbs, including prepositions, articles, and pronouns. It consists of a passage containing 10 blanks that provides a specific context. Students are allotted five minutes total to write a single word for each of the blanks. It is important to read the entire passage carefully and to use the contextual clues in the passage to determine an appropriate word. The response for each of the blanks is scored individually but must be completely correct to receive credit; all 10 scores count equally in calculating the total score. The Course Description provides an illustrative but not exhaustive list of the types of non-verb forms that may be evaluated in this task; of course, not all of these forms appear in any one passage. Among those included in this year's selection were definite and indefinite articles, articulated prepositions, demonstratives, possessives, and clitic pronouns (the locative *ci*, and the impersonal *si*). The passage was about the influence of great teachers on their students.

How well did students perform on these tasks?

The mean score for the Standard Group* was 5.05 out of a possible 20 points. The mean score for the Total Group was 5.91. These two tasks proved very difficult for many students. The exercises were challenging, in part, because the rules concerning their completion must be followed precisely (correct tense, spelling, accents, and so forth).

What were common student errors or omissions?

Common errors in the paragraph completion verbs task included failure to use the future tense of the reflexive verb *ritrovarsi* in number 2 (*si ritroveranno*); failure to use the subjunctive of the verb in number 3 (*rappresentino, rappresentassero*) and number 8 (*incarni, incarnasse*); lack of agreement of the past participle of *correre* with its subject (*sono corsa*) in number 5; and lack of agreement of the past participle with its preceding direct object in number 9 (*ho colta*). Finally, the use of the gerundial form (*portando, avendo portato*) in number 10 proved challenging to some students.

Common errors in the paragraph completion non-verbs task included the failure to use the articulated preposition (*dalla*) in number 14 and the relative pronoun (*quale*) in number 19.

Although some students used acute accents (é) in place of grave accents (è), or vice versa, this was not considered in determining the score.

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?

Some of the comments in this section reiterate good practices suggested in last year's report, yet they bear repeating because they contain important strategies to help students succeed on the AP Italian Language and Culture Exam.

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

Students should always take time to read very carefully the instructions on how to answer the two sets of paragraph completions. This advice applies to both tasks. It is also wise to refer students to www.collegeboard.com/apstudents, where they can access the Course Description, including sample questions, published free-response questions from previous exams, and scoring guidelines from previous exams. It should also be noted that teachers can retrieve all of the preceding materials, as well as sample student responses with scoring commentary from previous exams, at the College Board’s site for teachers, AP Central® (<http://apcentral.collegeboard.com>). Teachers should ensure that students have copies of the scoring guidelines, which explain the criteria for judging responses as correct or incorrect. In a vertically integrated curriculum (see *The AP Vertical Teams® Guide for World Languages and Cultures* [New York: College Board, 2006]) students should become familiar with the scoring guidelines from their very first year of Italian and each succeeding year until they enroll in the culminating AP Italian class. Moreover, teachers should implement the scoring guidelines in their assessment of student academic performance in the AP Italian course.

Students should always read the entire passage before writing an answer in any of the blanks so that they will understand the content and the context. Once they begin to fill in the blanks, they should reread the entire sentence prior to writing the answer. Finally, students should proofread their answers in order to ensure that they are the best possible choices, not only in the local context of the sentence but also in the overall context provided by the passage.

It is helpful for students to have practice with this format. To this end, the AP Italian teacher should seek out authentic texts from a variety of sources, including newspapers, magazines, Internet sites, and other print materials. The text should approximate the length of the paragraph completion samples published on AP Central. These carefully selected, exemplary, authentic texts must then be refined so that they contain 10 blank spaces for either the verb section or the non-verb section. The preparation of these materials requires judgment and time on the part of the AP Italian teacher. In preparing such exercises for the verb section, the instructor should seek diversity (tense, mood, nonfinite forms, and so forth). The same should also be done for the non-verb portion. It should be noted that the list of grammatical elements mentioned on page 7 in the 2008–2010 Course Description is illustrative and not exhaustive. These practice materials should be timed so that students can write answers under actual exam conditions. It would also be helpful to prepare additional examples that students could practice at home. Even though there may be more than one acceptable answer for a blank, the teacher should instruct students to provide only one answer in order to reduce the possibility of error.

In the verbs task, even if the correct answer is identical to the form in parentheses, that is, an infinitive, as in number 1, the student must write that verb form (infinitive) in the blank. Failure to write anything or a statement such as “*non cambia*” or “the same” means that the answer will be scored as incorrect. Additionally, the teacher must remind students not to use the *passato remoto*, as specified in the directions. In the non-verbs task, students should not write “*niente*” or the equivalent, because the item will be scored as incorrect. In this regard, they should be reminded that in either task a blank containing no response will always be scored as incorrect. Also, teachers should encourage students to write an “educated guess” in the blank, as this will give students some chance of producing a correct answer; in this part of the exam, no points are deducted for an incorrect response. As always, it is important that students look for contextual clues in both passages in order to provide a correct response.

Students should put accents directly over the vowel, not next to it or near it. Unclear placement of accents or missing accents make the answer incorrect, even if it is in all other respects correct. Students should write or print clearly. If it is not possible to distinguish an *o* from an *a*, for example, the answer will be scored as incorrect. Other reasons for marking a response as incorrect include the following: incorrect placement of an apostrophe, incorrect spelling, more than one response, or a response that is not in Italian.

Based on the errors in this exam, students can benefit from grammatical practice in the areas listed below.

Verbs

- Subject–verb agreement with the past participle (*passato prossimo* with verbs conjugated with *essere*)
- Direct object–verb agreement with the past participle (*passato prossimo* with verbs conjugated with *avere*)
- Review of the use of *avere* and *essere* with the *passato prossimo*
- Review of tenses, especially the subjunctive tenses
- Review of the use of the subjunctive
- Sequencing of tenses
- Use of the infinitive and gerund
- Irregular verbs
- Correct spelling

Non-Verbs

- Noun–adjective agreement
- Articulated prepositions
- Demonstratives
- Clitic pronouns (*ci*, *si*)
- Relative pronouns
- Placement of accent marks over vowels
- Placement of apostrophe
- Correct spelling

Stephen Krashen’s recommendation of “voluntary free reading” as a sound practice for students’ enhancement of vocabulary, spelling, grammar, and composition format (paragraphs, use of transitional elements) continues to be a compelling piece of advice (“Immersion: Why Not Try Voluntary Free Reading?” *Mosaic* 3, no. 1 [1995]: 1, 3–4). For this reason, students should be encouraged to read examples of good Italian prose. Although such materials may not be available in some school libraries, certain public libraries and almost all college and university libraries can be expected to have such resources. Also, the instructor can refer students to appropriate Web sites for examples of well-written prose. Likewise, the instructor may want to reproduce appropriate examples of Italian prose for students to read and review with special attention to the grammatical elements present within the context of a passage.

Writing: Composition

What was the intent of this task?

This task evaluates the student's ability to write a formal composition. It consists of a single prompt that identifies a topic, details aspects of the theme to address, and specifies that the response should be supported by some specific examples. Students are allotted 30 minutes to write a composition of about 150 words. The response receives a single, holistic score, based on the criteria outlined in the task directions. Students must write a well-organized and coherent composition as if they were submitting it to an Italian writing contest. Their work is evaluated for organization and clarity, range and appropriateness of vocabulary, grammatical accuracy, and spelling.

The prompt for this year's composition asked students to describe the advantages and/or disadvantages of participating in a study-abroad program and to indicate how it might influence their studies as well as change their future.

How well did students perform on this task?

The mean score for the Standard Group was 4.23 out of a possible 9 points. The mean score for the Total Group was 4.61. This task had reasonably good responses from many students. Nevertheless, some were not prepared to write a formal composition with clarity and accuracy.

What were common student errors or omissions?

The following are some of the common problems that were evidenced, all of which need to be emphasized in writing a composition. Many of these errors are recurrent and require ongoing attention.

- Failure to address the prompt directly and completely, including its various components
- Failure to use transitional elements within and between paragraphs
- Lack of adjective–noun agreement
- Lack of subject–verb agreement
- Failure to use appropriate tense
- Problems with articulated prepositions
- Lack of rich vocabulary and idioms (frequent repetition of basic and common vocabulary items)
- Failure to use complex structures (subordination: noun clauses, relative clauses, adverbial clauses; comparative and superlative structures; and so forth)
- Use of informal language (the student is instructed to write a composition for submission to an Italian writing contest)
- Failure to use the subjunctive where appropriate
- Failure to use accents (students who used acute accents [é] in place of grave accents [è], or vice versa, were not penalized)
- Failure to use appropriate paragraph structure
- Interference from another language

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?

Some of the comments in this section reiterate good practices suggested in last year’s report, yet they bear repeating because they contain important strategies to help students succeed in the exam. See also the reference to Stephen Krashen’s recommendation of “voluntary free reading” in the response to this question in the “Writing: Paragraph Completion” section above.

Students should always take time to read very carefully the instructions on how to respond to the composition prompt. They should also spend some time outlining the composition prior to writing it. It is also wise to refer students to www.collegeboard.com/apstudents, where they can access sample student essays from previous years, while at the same time referring them to the scoring guidelines so that they can see the criteria that were applied in scoring. It is not enough, however, to ask students to view the examples; teachers will also need to discuss the exemplary compositions so that students will have a clear idea of what features of these compositions will earn them a high score.

Students need periodic in-class practice in writing a composition under actual exam conditions (30 minutes, a specific topic, AP Exam instructions). They also must develop a sense of how much time it will take to write a 150-word composition. AP Italian teachers can find materials at AP Central (the sample questions in the Course Description, along with the free-response questions from the 2006 and 2007 exams) and can also prepare composition prompts similar in form to those of the exam as homework practice. It would be useful to post the scoring guidelines prominently in the classroom so that students may consult them. Finally, students should develop a habit of giving their composition a final proofreading for certain common grammatical errors involving subject–verb agreement, noun–adjective agreement, use of the subjunctive, placement of accents, spelling errors, use of transitional elements, appropriate use of paragraphs, and so forth.

Culture: Composition (Content and Language)

What was the intent of this task?

This task assesses the ability to write a formal composition on a cultural topic. It consists of a single prompt that identifies a cultural topic, directs students to select an example of that topic and explain what makes it significant, and specifies that the response should be supported by references to specific cultural information. Students are allotted 30 minutes to write a composition of about 150 words. The response receives two holistic scores—one for content (that is, cultural knowledge) and one for language usage—based on the criteria outlined in the task directions. In calculating the total score, the content score is weighted 80 percent, and the language score is weighted 20 percent. Students must write a well-organized and coherent composition, as if they were submitting it to an Italian writing contest. The work is evaluated for knowledge of Italian culture, as well as organization and clarity, range and appropriateness of vocabulary, grammatical accuracy, and spelling.

The 2008–2010 Course Description lists five general areas from which the composition’s subject may be taken. This year’s topic asked students to choose a specific holiday or cultural celebration in Italy, such as a religious, civil, or regional one. They were further directed to describe at least two different aspects of that holiday or celebration (how, why, and where it is celebrated, along with customs, specific characteristics, and so forth) that make it important and to explain why.

Moreover, they were instructed to justify their opinion with at least one cultural reference (film, readings, art, music, and so forth). In addition to the required cultural reference, students were allowed to cite personal experiences and class discussions.

How well did students perform on this question?

As indicated in the table below, the language scores for this task were 3.74 for the Standard Group and 4.18 for the Total Group. Even though the scoring guidelines for the culture composition are similar to those for the general composition, student performance on the language component of the cultural composition was lower than their performance on the general composition (4.23 for the Standard Group and 4.61 for the Total Group).

	Standard Group	Total Group	Possible Points
Content	4.37	4.67	9
Language	3.74	4.18	9

Note that although the mean content score is higher than the mean language score for both groups, these numbers should not be directly compared, as they are based on completely separate scoring guidelines. Nevertheless, they do indicate that, on average, students were slightly better able to meet the standards established for the content dimension than for the language dimension of this composition.

What were common student errors or omissions?

Some common errors and omissions in the compositions included the following:

Content

- Failure to choose an appropriate holiday or a cultural celebration
- Failure to discuss at least two different aspects that make the holiday or cultural celebration important and to include an explanation of why this is so—that is, an interpretation of these aspects rather than a simple enumeration of factual information
- Failure to synthesize cultural information
- Failure to present relevant cultural information
- Failure to cite a cultural work in support of statements

Language

- Failure to write in paragraph form
- Failure to use transitional elements to connect paragraphs and sentences within paragraphs
- Failure to use appropriate register (the student is instructed to write a composition intended for submission to an Italian writing contest)
- Failure to use varied vocabulary (frequent repetition of certain basic and common vocabulary items)
- Spelling errors
- Failure to use complex structures (subordinate clauses: noun clauses, relative clauses, adverbial clauses, and so forth)
- Interference from another language

While some students used acute accents [é] in place of grave accents [è], or vice versa, this was not considered in determining the score.

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?

See the response to this question in the “Writing: Composition” section above.

Additionally, it is important to remind students that the culture composition will be scored twice—once for content, and a second time for language—by two different Readers. For this reason, students should develop a habit of giving their essays a final proofreading that focuses on both of these dimensions of their response. First, they should check for accuracy of the cultural content and interpretation of any facts presented, and they should make sure that they have answered the question completely. Second, they should recheck their compositions for grammatical errors involving subject–verb agreement, noun–adjective agreement, the use of the subjunctive, placement of accents, spelling errors, use of transitional elements, repetition of certain words throughout the essay, appropriate paragraphs, and so forth.

Finally, students should get in the habit of citing cultural references in their compositions. This would include film, literary sources, newspapers, and so forth. Being able to do this presupposes that students spend time—likely both in and out of class—identifying, discussing, and interpreting what the information in such cultural products implicitly and explicitly reveals about the culture of Italy. During classroom discussions, it would be helpful for the AP Italian teacher to call students’ attention to when a segment of a film, an opera, a literary text, a work of art, or a Web site exemplifies a cultural reference; in this way, students will become more easily attuned to this notion. In one particularly effective cultural reference, for instance, a student cited the film *Come te nessuno mai*, written and directed by Gabriele Muccino, in which a particular *fiesta* occurs.

Speaking: Story Narration

What was the intent of this task?

This task assesses the ability to narrate orally an informal story, containing a beginning, middle, and end. It is composed of a series of pictures that depict certain events. Students are allotted two minutes to prepare the narration and two minutes to tell the story. The response receives a single, holistic score, based on the criteria outlined in the task directions. Students must create a complete story, based on the pictures, as if they were relating the events to a friend. Scoring is based on the following factors: fluency, ability to narrate, grammatical accuracy, range of vocabulary, pronunciation, and completeness of the response.

This year’s picture sequence showed a group of four young people planning a trip to the Parco Nazionale d’Abruzzo. They pack their car; set up camp; and get into their tent to read, listen to music, and sleep. When they wake up the next morning, their car and camping equipment are damaged. They imagine that it is the result of wild animals, so they decide to go to the Pensione Abruzzo.

How well did students perform on this task?

The mean score for the Standard Group was 3.31 out of a possible 6 points. The mean score for the Total Group was 3.58. Students were reasonably well-prepared to meet the standards established for this speaking task, though some did not perform as well as they might have because they failed to provide a narrative with a beginning, middle, and end.

What were common student errors or omissions?

Overall, students at the lower end of the scoring range failed to tell a complete story, failed to use transitional elements, had very limited vocabulary, lacked fluency, displayed interference from another language, finished before two minutes elapsed, and made frequent grammatical errors, even in basic structures. Common errors or omissions included the following:

- Failure to tell a story with a beginning, middle, and end
- Sequential description of the pictures instead of giving a narrative
- Repetition of certain basic and common vocabulary items
- Very long pauses
- Failure to use transitional elements
- Lack of fluency
- Interference from another language
- Failure to use complex grammatical structures (subordination: noun clauses, relative clauses, adverbial clauses, and so forth)
- Basic grammatical errors (subject–verb agreement, noun–adjective agreement, inappropriate selection of auxiliary verb in the *passato prossimo*, and so forth)
- Sketchy narrative that lacked detail

Based on your experience of student responses at the AP Reading, what message would you like to send to teachers that might help them improve the performance of their students on the exam?

Students should always pay careful attention to the instructions. It is wise to refer students to www.collegeboard.com/apstudents so that they can view published examples, along with instructions, for each part of the exam. Teachers should also ensure that students have copies of the scoring guidelines used to evaluate student responses.

Although students speak in class, they may not have experience in sustained narration, particularly as based on a sequence of pictures. For this reason, they will need to practice this task in class under conditions similar to those of the exam. The instructor may obtain sequences of pictures from AP Central, including those from other languages (although any materials from AP Exams in other languages will lack the cultural context embedded in the story narration pictures in the AP Italian Exam). This activity, and all AP Exam questions, should be practiced from the beginning of the year and throughout the entire course. It should be part of a complete set of diverse speaking activities, as all sorts of oral preparation will enhance students' ability in this area.

Students tend to describe the pictures instead of narrating an account with a beginning, middle, and end. Prior to beginning the narration, they have two minutes to make notes and prepare the story. This is a very important preparatory step to providing a complete oral narrative, and students should practice this aspect of the exam.

It is also very important that students have familiarity with the equipment to be employed during the exam so that they will be able to use it correctly. Prior to the administration of the exam, all of the equipment should be inspected to make sure that it is working properly. At the Reading, some responses were difficult or impossible to score owing to recording problems. It is essential that student responses are recorded properly, regardless of whether tapes or digital recordings are used.

- Prior to the exam the teacher should work with school authorities, the AP Coordinator, and the proctor to ensure that there will be no distracting noises while students are recording. Also, students must be seated far enough apart so as not to interfere with each other while responding; spacing requirements are detailed in the *AP Coordinator's Manual*.
- Because it is important to ensure that the proctor knows how to administer the speaking section of the exam, it is helpful for the teacher and the proctor to review together the relevant pages in the *AP Coordinator's Manual* and the *AP Examination Instructions* book well in advance of the exam date (both publications are available on AP Central; use the "Search" function at the top of the "Exams" page). Common problems included recording at the wrong speed, recording on the wrong track, and recordings cut off in mid-response.
- Additionally, teachers must impress on their students that the stopping and starting of their machines while recording in order to give themselves time to think and formulate an answer is not allowed and could result in scores being delayed because of a suspected security violation. Students should follow directions and start, pause, or stop the recorder only when told to do so. Proctors should never pause or stop the playing of the master CD.

Speaking: Conversation

What was the intent of this task?

This task evaluates the ability to engage in spoken conversation. It comprises a statement identifying an interlocutor and conversation topic, a practice question, and five scored questions. Students are given 20 seconds to speak at each turn in the conversation. Each of the five responses receives a holistic score, based on the criteria outlined in the task directions; all five scores count equally in calculating the total score. Students are evaluated on their ability to respond to each question fully and appropriately, and to express themselves fluently and correctly. Credit is deducted if the answer is too short.

This year's conversation sequence contained a series of exchanges with an Italian scientist about environmental problems. The first four questions asked (1) what the most important environmental problem is; (2) what the student does to protect the environment; (3) whether the student's friends worry about the environment and why; and (4) what initiative the student would propose to protect the environment. Finally, the student was instructed to ask the scientist for help in writing an article about a particular environmental problem.

How well did students perform on this task?

The mean score for the Standard Group was 11.6 out of a possible 30 points. The mean score for the Total Group was 13.44.

What were common student errors or omissions?

Responses that received lower scores generally exhibited the following characteristics:

- Failure to understand the question
- Failure to answer the question completely
- Frequent hesitation
- Failure to use the entire 20 seconds to answer the question completely
- Limited vocabulary and idioms
- Errors in basic grammatical structures, including the appropriate use of the auxiliary verbs *avere* and *essere* with the *passato prossimo*, subject–verb agreement, and noun–adjective agreement
- Interference from another language
- Failure to use complex structures (subordination: noun clauses, relative clauses, adverbial clauses; contrary-to-fact grammatical structures; and so forth)
- Failure to use the appropriate register, especially in question 5, in which the student must address questions directly to the scientist, which requires an explicitly formal register

Based on your experience of student responses at the AP Reading, what message would you like to send to teachers that might help them improve the performance of their students on the exam?

As is the case with the story narration task, it is important that students practice this exercise throughout the academic year with the equipment that will be used during the actual administration of the exam. They should practice responding to a series of five prompts, including ones that require them to initiate an exchange, such as by asking a question. Students also need to develop a sense of how to respond in 20 seconds. They should listen carefully to the conversation prompts and say something relevant in response, even if what they say is brief; in that way, they will receive at least some credit for each of the five turns in the conversation, as “*Non lo so,*” silence, responses in English, or a series of paralinguistic utterances such as “ah” or “um” will all result in a score of 0.

Students should listen to a wide variety of samples of male and female voices as a way of preparing for this part of the exam. Appropriate clips from various media (film, songs, opera, television, radio, and so forth) would be useful in and out of the classroom. Students and teachers might find such materials on television and the Internet, as well as at certain movie rental stores or in public or college/university libraries.

Speaking instruction in the AP Italian classroom should not be solely focused on the conversation task. Rather, a variety of activities should be introduced into the curriculum, for example, interviews and debates. Students must be able to respond spontaneously to different situations. This will also improve fluency and confidence in their linguistic abilities. At the same time, teachers need to pay attention to teaching verb tenses, increasing vocabulary, and so forth. As a final note, it should be remembered that student self-correction of an error is always viewed favorably in the scoring of the speaking portions of the exam.

At the Reading, some responses were difficult or, in some instances, impossible to evaluate, owing to recording problems. It is vital that student responses are recorded properly, regardless of whether tapes or digital recordings are used. See also the bulleted points at the end of the Speaking: Story Narration section for more help in improving student recordings.