



## Student Performance Q&A: 2008 AP® French Language Free-Response Questions

The following comments on the 2008 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. Since 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 the 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?*

As is typical, students found this exercise challenging. Most of the "function words" were straightforward, but two stood out as being quite difficult—one with a context requiring "*miens*" and another requiring "*auquel*." The mean score for the Standard Group\* for the function words was 6.19 out of a possible 15 points, lower than the 2007 mean of 7.32 and the 2006 mean of 7.50.

Verb fill-ins appear to have been somewhat difficult this year. The exercises required several different forms: the imperfect, the *passé composé*, the imperative (including "*n'aie pas*"), the

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\* 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 cutoff scores are based on the Standard Group.

conditional, the past conditional, the present subjunctive, and the present (“*je crains*”). The mean score for the Standard Group for the verb fill-ins was 6.07 out of a possible 15 points, lower than the 2007 mean of 7.34 and the 2006 mean of 6.44.

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

Silent letters and compound verbs typically open up possibilities for error. Good reading skills in French and well-developed vocabularies help students to do well on the two fill-in question sets.

***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?***

Since verbs and function words come up constantly in any language, students who know these forms well will inevitably be more proficient in a given language than those who do not. To improve their performance on the fill-in questions, students inevitably must improve their French skills. Words such as *qui, y, en, auquel*, and, yes, *miens* are essential for fluency in French. Verb forms such as *seraient, aurait donné, dise*, and others that appeared on this year’s exam are both at the Advanced\*\* level and very common.

To help students develop their French skills and gain familiarity with the fill-in questions on the AP French Language Exam, teachers could assign their students to make up their own questions. This might involve locating authentic French texts on the Internet. Students would be required to read bits of prose (e.g., from online versions of *Le Monde, L’Express*, and *Le Figaro*; historical anecdotes from [www.herodote.net](http://www.herodote.net); stories by Maupassant on the ABU: la Bibliothèque Universelle Web site at <http://abu.cnam.fr/BIB/auteurs/Maupassantg.html>) and to isolate some sentences or word strings that contain function words or interesting verb forms. An obvious approach would be to use the computer’s “Find” function (ctrl + F) to see if such words as *lequel, dont, celui, serait, ayant*, and so on appear on the Web page. With simple electronic cutting and pasting, students could generate question sets that would be part of a growing pool of sample questions for the whole class.

In any case, 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 write on the theme of important decisions.

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\*\* References in this document to Advanced and Intermediate levels of language learning reflect the ACTFL Proficiency Guidelines.

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

There were many good essays, and even students at the lower levels were able to respond. The mean score for the Standard Group was 4.72 out of a possible 9 points. This came quite close to the mean scores of 2007 (4.76) and 2006 (4.66). The question itself gave an outline that some students, especially at the higher levels, chose to follow. Very few exam booklets contained blank or off-topic essay sections, and very few students received scores of 0 or 1. This was largely because of the broad nature of this year's essay theme: decisions and consequences are the stuff of everyday life. In the essay exercise students can express themselves with any verb tenses they wish; there are no requirements to use any particular tense or even a variety of tenses. Essays were, on average, one-and-a-third-pages in length.

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

Aside from the typical mistakes of spelling and usage in written French, Readers saw no systematic errors or omissions.

### ***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 remind 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 work on organizing their remarks clearly and logically, and they should learn to avoid a conclusion that merely restates the introduction. They need experience in making effective use of examples: news items, personal experiences, or anecdotes. Students should also become familiar with 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 this question? (Question 1)***

Questions 1–3 concerned a series of pictures showing a young person accidentally leaving his backpack on the train. Question 1 was the typical invitation to students to describe or recount the story presented by the pictures. It represents a typical Intermediate probe that is rarely handled on an Advanced level.

### ***What was the intent of this question? (Question 2)***

Usually this question is an invitation for students to personalize their responses. In this case, as last year, it also was a past probe, so it was difficult for students to respond in any other way but in the past tense. Thus it is an Advanced probe.

### ***What was the intent of this question? (Question 3)***

This usually is an invitation for students to respond in a more general way. It often invites the use of abstract language.

### ***How well did students perform on this question? (Questions 1–3)***

The Standard Group’s mean score for question group 1–3 was 9.79 out of a possible 15 points, higher than the 2007 mean of 9.65 and the 2006 mean of 9.54.

### ***What was the intent of this question? (Question 4)***

The split-screen pictures for questions 4–5 invited students to demonstrate their ability to talk about life goals, careers, and changing ambitions (one screen depicted a young boy imagining life as a pop singer; the other showed the same boy 10 years later, working on a computer and daydreaming about becoming an influential executive). To answer question 4, students were likely to need the past, present, and future tenses; they would have been making predominantly descriptive statements.

### ***What was the intent of this question? (Question 5)***

In responding to question 5, students were required to express opinions and in all likelihood formulate a few abstractions. They had to demonstrate the ability to produce an “integrated” discourse.

### ***How well did students perform on this question? (Questions 4–5)***

The Standard Group’s mean score for question group 4–5 was 6.57 out of a possible 10 points, higher than the 2007 mean of 6.40 and the 2006 mean of 6.05.

### ***What were common student errors or omissions? (Questions 1–3 and 4–5)***

Students who did not understand the word *inattendu* (unexpected) had trouble with question 3. Overall, weak students typically had difficulty with verb tenses, correct vocabulary, and/or 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 Exam, teachers should tell them to *speak for the full amount of time allowed*. Teachers should review the exam format with their students using the *required equipment* on a regular basis; they should require students to use synonyms and antonyms for questions that ask for comparisons and contrasts; and they should urge students to minimize the use of “*quelque chose comme ça*” and similar vague expressions.

Since 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 do this exercise with picture sets in one’s native language, to get the hang of this unusual act of communication before attempting the exercise in French.

See Brant Hadzima’s article “Teaching the Picture Sequence on AP Exams for Modern Languages” on AP Central® ([apcentral.collegeboard.com/apc/members/courses/teachers\\_corner/49324.html](http://apcentral.collegeboard.com/apc/members/courses/teachers_corner/49324.html)). Picture sets from past AP French Language Exams can be found on the AP French Language Exam Page on AP Central.