



Student Performance Q&A:

2008 AP® French Literature Free-Response Questions

The following comments on the 2008 free-response questions for AP® French Literature 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.

Question 1: *Analyse*

What was the intent of this question?

The *analyse* allows students to demonstrate their capacities for literary analysis. This exercise consists of two directed questions that require a close reading of a text that the students have read and discussed in class during the year. For the 2008 exam, students had to explicate Guillaume Apollinaire's famous poem, "Le pont Mirabeau." Subquestion 1 directed students to analyze the major themes of the poem with respect to the setting and the poet's feelings. Subquestion 2 required them to assess the importance of literary devices for thematic development and portrayal of the poet's frame of mind.

How well did students perform on this question?

The 2008 Standard Group* earned a mean score of 6.27 out of a possible 9 points for the *analyse* content. This represents an increase over the commendable mean score of 6 for the 2007 Standard Group. The 2008 students displayed good writing skills, with a mean writing score of 3.43 out of a possible 5 points—almost identical to the 2007 Standard Group's mean score of 3.42. The mean content score for the Total Group in 2008 was 6.40 (compared to the 2007 mean of 6.20); the mean writing score was 3.61 (compared to the 2007 mean of 3.63).

* 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 Total Group.

What were common student errors or omissions?

Most students were able to find various literary devices, but only the well-prepared ones could connect them to the expression of the poet's feelings.

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 students gave the appearance of not having learned enough literary and analytical terms with which to write incisively. Vagueness can be a problem; teachers must help students learn how to treat causal relations so as to bring out the *significance* of their observations. The opportunity to be *incisive* was often missed.

Question 2: *Essai*

What was the intent of this question?

Question 2, the literary essay, allows students to demonstrate the breadth of their knowledge of the works as well as the level of their analytical skills. In the 2008 exam, students could choose either *Candide* or *L'École des femmes* and discuss the roles of characters who act as mentors. Responses to this question indicated how closely the students appreciated the dynamics between key characters.

How well did students perform on this question?

This was a very good question, one that generated long essays and prompted Readers to use all of the scoring levels. The Standard Group's mean score for content was 5.48 out of a possible 9 points; its mean score for language was 3.64 out of a possible 5 points. For the Total Group, the mean scores were 5.40 for content and 3.77 for language. (In 2007, mean scores for the Standard Group were 5.28 for content and 3.34 for language; mean scores for the Total Group were 5.33 for content and 3.54 for language.)

What were common student errors or omissions?

A surprising number of students identified as guides or mentors characters who clearly were neither, such as Cunégonde in *Candide*. In addition, only the stronger students provided an adequate answer to the last part of the question: how the influence of the guides contributes to the development of themes in the chosen work.

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?

- Train students to read the question very carefully and interpret what it is asking. Every word should be addressed.

- Teach students how to organize an essay. It must be logically structured, with an introduction that does not merely restate the question, and it must have a conclusion that is not a mere summary or restatement. Some students rightly compose a conclusion that provides an opening to related issues. However, this “opening up” should not go too far afield.
- Tell students to pay attention to progression. The essay must have a thesis that the student develops by citing pertinent examples taken from the text. Good essays are not too general.
- Advise students on how to avoid plot summary and paraphrasing.
- Warn students against an excessive reliance on biography.
- Teach students how to limit the amount of commentary on background material. Remind them that they have limited time and therefore little space for going into such matters as the historical, political, cultural, or literary contexts of the text under study.
- Remind students that when identifying stylistic elements (figures of speech, for instance), they need to explain how the figures enrich the text. What is their purpose, role, or function?