



Student Performance Q&A:

2008 AP[®] United States History Free-Response Questions

The following comments on the 2008 free-response questions for AP[®] United States History were written by the Chief Reader, Raymond “Skip” Hyser of James Madison University in Harrisonburg, Virginia. 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

What was the intent of this question?

The intent of the question was for students to evaluate the effect of the Vietnam War on the United States during the period 1964 to 1975. Students were asked to analyze political, economic, and social factors and the ways in which these factors led to increasing tensions during this time period.

How well did students perform on this question?

Generally, students performed well on this document-based question. The mean score was 3.56 out of a possible 9 points. Responses were somewhat better than average, with many students showing good knowledge of outside information. Many essays had a thesis and a structure that addressed all three parts of the question. Most students used the entire range of documents with very little misinterpretation of them. Students also did an excellent job of linking documents (particularly the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution to the War Powers Act and the Martin Luther King Jr. document to the James Fallows document). There did not seem to be any single document that caused students particular problems. Most students addressed all three parts of the question.

Essays that received high scores demonstrated the ability to make sophisticated cause and effect connections. Since the question dealt with a more recent time period, students seemed to understand the cultural milieu; they performed remarkably well, making links to various social, political, and cultural themes from knowledge acquired both in the classroom and through life experiences.

What were common student errors or omissions?

Student quoting of documents was more pronounced than usual. Students confused presidents and their actions, indicating that chronological sequencing continues to be a significant problem. Students also tended to overgeneralize too frequently (e.g., “Everybody was against the war after the Tet Offensive”). This tendency was particularly pronounced with regard to the antiwar movement. Discussion of economics was notably weaker than discussion of either political or social factors. Discussion of events after 1968 was also obviously weaker.

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 should be encouraged to synthesize the information in the documents rather than simply paraphrasing them or using lengthy direct quotes. Teachers should continue to emphasize the importance of incorporating outside information into essays. Teachers should also continue to stress the importance of combining thematic and chronological developments when answering the document-based question. Students should be taught to pay attention to the source line, since doing so may help prevent some of the chronological errors in the essays.

Question 2

What was the intent of this question?

The intent of the question was for students to analyze how actions taken by both American Indians and European colonists shaped the relationships between the two groups. Students were asked to discuss these relationships in two regions, out of a choice of four (New England, Chesapeake, Spanish Southwest, or New York and New France), in seventeenth-century North America. The intent as well was for students to examine how new cultural norms emerged from the contact of Europeans and American Indians. Students were expected to recognize the activist nature of American Indians as well as Europeans and understand that the relationship between the two was not static and unchanging over the course of the century. In addition, the question was meant to encourage students to express an understanding that seventeenth-century North America was made up of a variety of European and American Indian cultures with diverse value systems, based on the motivations of each group and the circumstances in which they found themselves. Overall, students were expected to demonstrate comprehension of the diverse origins and foundations of the United States.

How well did students perform on this question?

The responses indicated that there has been some limited success in taking a global approach to American history in the colonial period. The mean score was 2.77 out of a possible 9 points. Students showed some particular positives in a number of ways. For example, in even the weakest essays, students made an effort, usually in their thesis statements, to compare and contrast the two regions they were discussing. Whether they were stating that one region was more sympathetic to American Indians than another, or that American Indians made alliances with one group of Europeans rather than with another, many students understood that a comparison or contrast was part of the question. This is a clear change from previous exams where compare-and-contrast questions did not contain such theses. Although many responses lacked specific

information, a number contained some reference to factual evidence, such as King Philip's War, the Pueblo Revolt, Pocahontas and John Rolfe, and the French fur trade in New France. In some essays it was clear that students knew the difference between the myths and facts surrounding American Indians and their contacts with Europeans. Nearly all of the regions referenced in this question were chosen often, New England and the Chesapeake most frequently. Even the generalizations that students often used in describing the relationships were frequently accurate.

What were common student errors or omissions?

Responses showed geographical confusion, such as situating William Penn and the Quaker treatment of American Indians in New England instead of Pennsylvania. Chronological confusion was also frequent but not as common as anticipated; the Aztecs, Pontiac's Rebellion, the French and Indian War, and Jackson's Indian Removal Act were included in answers, but not frequently. Many students had difficulty discussing American Indian actions and often simply portrayed them as victims. Only the best answers were comprehensive in discussing change over time in the relationships, and relationships often meant results. The New York/New France choice created some difficulty because theoretically it necessitated a discussion of Dutch, French, and English relationships with the American Indians in the 1600s. This was a considerable amount of information to cover when compared to the other three choices, none of which required such complexity.

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?

As much as possible, teachers should examine the global context of United States history in both concrete and conceptual ways. For example, the motivation of each of the European colonizers should be known, as well as the value systems they brought with them. Teachers should continue to emphasize analytical writing that examines causation, change over time, and comparison and contrast. Doing all of this is challenging, but increasingly the study of United States history is taking a global approach.

Question 3

What was the intent of this question?

This straightforward question asked students to analyze the market revolution's impact on the economies of two of three regions (Northeast, Midwest, or South) from 1815 to 1860. The question provided broad latitude for students to make connections between the defining characteristics of the market revolution and economic transformation; students were expected to use a thematic approach.

How well did students perform on this question?

The mean score was 2.95 out of a possible 9 points. The construction of the question made it easy for students to develop a thesis and write about two regions; the majority of students selected the Northeast and South. Students' knowledge of the market revolution often tended to be general and descriptive, with such simplistic comments as "the North industrialized" and "the South grew

cotton and tobacco.” Essays that included only these generic descriptions ranked lower on the scoring scale. Many students indicated that the market revolution had varying impacts on the economies of the selected regions. Core knowledge of economic sectionalism was demonstrated effectively in many essays, with the top-scoring responses grasping the interregional and international impacts of various topics. Stronger essays used relevant, specific information anchored within the chronological scope of 1815 to 1860 to effectively link the impact of the market revolution to the economies of *two* regions. High-scoring essays recognized some change over time and frequently interwove significant regional overlapping transportation systems, technological innovations, development of the market economy, and/or the international impact of plantation slavery and northeastern industry.

What were common student errors or omissions?

Many students paraphrased the question as their thesis statement and gave little indication that they understood the defining characteristics of the market revolution. Responses were often generalized to the extent that Readers could not tell whether students were describing the economies of colonial America or Reconstruction. Because of the inclusion of the date 1860, many students attempted to make this question a coming-of-the-Civil-War response, concentrating on political events like the *Dred Scott* case, the election of 1860, or Fort Sumter. Much information from beyond 1860 was included, such as Henry Ford, Andrew Carnegie, automobiles, and the transcontinental railroad. A number of students had difficulty determining geographical locations. In addition, students showed a simplistic understanding when describing regional economies (e.g., industrial North; King Cotton; Midwest farms) rather than providing an analysis of the impact of the market revolution.

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 integrate and review themes like social class and gender. Utilizing and/or constructing charts with decades and categories like “social,” “political,” and “economic” will help students to develop a broader perspective and to think conceptually. Geography must be emphasized, with students filling out maps as a regular classroom exercise. Students need consistent instruction and lots of experience with writing in a variety of formats, including chronological, cause and effect, and change over time. When responding to a free-response question, students must consider the intent and focus of the question *before* writing, and then they must write analytically. Description and factual knowledge are important, but the most effective essays use linkage.

Question 4

What was the intent of this question?

The question tested students’ knowledge of the extent to which southern leaders’ idea of a “New South” was a reality by the time of the First World War. Students had to reference two of three possible topics (economic development, politics, or race relations) in their answer.

How well did students perform on this question?

About 75 percent of students chose this question, which meant there was a wide range in the quality of the essays. The mean score was 2.99 out of a possible 9 points. High-scoring essays demonstrated knowledge of southern leaders' idea of a New South *and* evaluated the extent to which it had been achieved by the time of the First World War. Students had more difficulty evaluating the extent to which race relations and politics demonstrated southern leaders' idea of a New South, because many students misinterpreted southern leaders' idea of a New South with regard to race relations. They often used the idea of racial equality as suggested by the Radical Republicans or a modern concept of racial equality as the starting point for their arguments. These students often correctly described race relations in the South by the time of the First World War, particularly how white supremacy was established after Reconstruction. Some students approached the question as a failure of Reconstruction or as a comparison with or contrast to the antebellum South.

The topic of race relations was chosen most often; many essays focused exclusively on what happened to African Americans after Reconstruction. Many essays addressed economic development and politics only from the perspective of race relations (e.g., African American sharecropping as the only aspect of economic development or disenfranchisement of African Americans as the only characteristic of politics). Economic development was the next topic chosen the most, followed, finally, by politics.

On a positive note, students demonstrated sound knowledge of the various legal and extralegal means by which southern whites reestablished white supremacy in the South. They also correctly defined the meaning of economic development in the New South and analyzed the extent to which a New South was a reality in terms of economic development. Finally, students recognized that for all three topics, there were varying degrees of success in achieving southern leaders' idea of a New South.

What were common student errors or omissions?

Students did not understand southern leaders' idea of a New South with regard to race relations in particular and sometimes with regard to politics. Many students had problems with chronology, often confusing the New South with Radical Reconstruction or not placing historical events, developments, legislation, and so on in each of the categories (e.g., placing the passage of the Black Codes in the same period as Jim Crow laws).

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?

This question required critical thinking skills to link a particular idea (New South) with two topics (e.g., politics and race relations) that students do not usually associate with the term. Students must read such a question carefully because it may require them to process and apply historical information in a different context than the context they studied in class. Teachers should prompt students to think about how different constituencies in American history viewed political, economic, and social developments in their relevant and respective time periods. Teachers should also emphasize the importance of chronology, particularly in relation to cause and effect in history.

They should stress the importance of writing a clear thesis that explicitly answers the question and of organizing an essay around a logical presentation of accurate historical information to support the thesis. It is important to reinforce analytical and writing skills through explicit instruction in writing essays that answer historical questions and require analysis—in other words, teach the process of analytical historical writing as opposed to just narrative composition.

Question 5

What was the intent of this question?

The intent of the question was to test students' knowledge of the shifts in support for various political parties during the period 1928 to 1948, as well as the reasons and consequences for any shifts. Students needed to know about six presidential elections and the major national events and people involved—in addition to analyzing both cause and effect for the shifting political loyalties—in order to write an effective essay. The question required students to address not just the elections but the developments that impacted the outcome of those elections.

How well did students perform on this question?

The mean score was 2.98 out of a possible 9 points. This question was structured differently from the other free-response questions, as it required students to select their own evidence rather than giving them specific elections or political parties. Generally, most students recognized the shift in support from the Republicans to the Democratic Party after the start of the Great Depression, as reflected in the elections of Franklin Roosevelt beginning in 1932. The majority of students used the Great Depression and the Second World War as the major causes for this shift. Better essays discussed the reverse shift away from the Democrats after 1946, using the Republican Party majority in Congress and the split of the southern Democrats (the Dixiecrats) as reasons. Some of the best responses noted that the combination of two crises (depression and war) and relatively effective leadership paved the way for unprecedented interventionism by the federal government, transforming the role of government and permanently making it far larger and more intrusive than almost anyone had imagined possible. Higher-scoring essays also noted a return to smaller and more conservative government as a consequence of this later shift; they observed that discredited Hooverism meant conservatives could stymie passage of new programs (e.g., the Fair Deal) and dismantle some New Deal agencies (e.g., the Civilian Conservation Corps), but that wholesale scrapping of the New Deal was impossible.

Particularly impressive were those essays that not only touched on causes of the Great Depression but also reflected a grasp of economic issues and party and presidential attempts to address them. Overall, students were particularly well versed on the New Deal, but only the best essays specifically noted that Roosevelt was not an unmitigated advocate of civil rights, as evidenced by his refusal to support antilynching legislation. Students also understood the role Eleanor Roosevelt played in helping to build what became the New Deal coalition. Students' easy identification of African Americans as part of the New Deal coalition reflects the emphasis on civil rights found in both the AP United States History course and the most widely used textbooks. Equal emphasis on other elements of the New Deal coalition in courses and texts might allow students to identify them as easily.

What were common student errors or omissions?

Students frequently confused “reasons” for shifts with “consequences.” They should have been able to discern the difference. They also showed a tendency to believe that African Americans joined the New Deal coalition in 1932, rather than in 1936, and to put a misleading emphasis on Roosevelt’s commitment to civil rights as an explanation for the shift in the loyalties of African American voters to the Democratic Party.

Some students lacked a basic chronological understanding of United States history and wrote essays on the Jacksonian era because they confused the time period with that of 1828 to 1848. The majority of responses stressed shifting loyalties for African American voters, while fewer than half of responses addressed why farmers, the elderly, and laborers or the middle class had concrete reasons to become part of the New Deal coalition.

Few students dealt with the significance of the Second World War; this was illustrated by muddled discussions of Roosevelt’s stance on neutrality, especially his nuanced effort to convince the American people that supporting antifascist states (particularly Great Britain after France fell) might keep the war on the European side of the Atlantic. Many students who addressed Truman’s decision to deploy the atomic bomb (which they more often than not referred to as a “nuclear bomb”) confused later historiographic debate when they asserted that his decision to drop the bomb was an unpopular one in the 1948 election. Essays indicated that students knew Truman was not as beloved as Roosevelt, that Truman was seen as more conservative than his predecessor and that his style was much more confrontational, but students rarely could articulate why Truman was so ineffectual with Congress and what accounted for his miraculous come-from-behind victory in 1948.

Lastly, some students demonstrated a correct understanding of the geography of elections, writing that the Solid South was Democratic after the Civil War; but fewer students indicated an awareness of northern or western political geography, such as the switch of northern cities to the Democratic Party, a shift that began in the 1920s.

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 need to emphasize that students must read the question carefully and answer the question that has been asked. Furthermore, students need to be taught how to approach questions that require them to select their own categories, evidence, and/or topics; responses to such questions must have strong analysis and consider the range of issues and topics elicited by the question. Teachers would be well served to use maps in the classroom. For this particular question, the shifts in party loyalty can be seen on maps—the transformation of the South over the past century, which can be contrasted with the changes in the Northeast and New England during the same time period. The Midwest and West should also be incorporated into this discussion. Depending on where they live, students themselves might be aware of these political dynamics, which would reinforce the classroom lesson. Since students showed knowledge of presidents’ character traits (e.g., Hoover’s “rugged individualism,” Roosevelt’s optimism, and Truman’s feistiness), they might attempt to gain some understanding of the basic personalities of important leaders, especially as those personalities relate to leaders’ political philosophies and visions for the country.