



Student Performance Q&A: 2009 AP® French Language Free-Response Questions

The following comments on the 2009 free-response questions for AP® French Language were written by the Chief Reader, Irène d’Almeida of the University of Arizona in Tucson. 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 fill-ins are designed to assess students’ command of the French language (grammar, vocabulary, and usage). 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. Because a fill-in question is designed to allow for only a single correct response, language fill-ins offer a more objective way of measuring language skills.

How well did students perform on this question?

For the function words, the 2009 Standard Group* achieved a mean score of 7.32 out of a possible 15 points. On the verb fill-ins, the Standard Group achieved a mean score of 7.59 out of a possible 15 points.

What were common student errors or omissions?

No common errors were identified. Students with good reading skills in French and strong vocabularies were able to do well on the fill-in questions.

*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.

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 must improve their French skills. Teachers should encourage their students to read as much French as possible.

For the exam itself, teachers should suggest that students read the whole paragraph, which will provide context, before adding the missing verbs or function words.

Part A: Composition (Question 31)

What was the intent of this question?

The essay question requires that students write a well-organized and coherent composition of substantial length. The question allows students to demonstrate the level at which they can express themselves in written French while addressing a specified topic. This year students were asked to write about decisive events—"the turns in life"—that had important and durable consequences for their lives (or the life of a friend or a family member).

How well did students perform on this question?

The essay question offered a chance for students to tell a story. The mean score for the Standard Group was 4.78 out of a possible 9 points.

What were common student errors or omissions?

Many students answered only part of the question. This may be due to the fact that the question had several components. On occasion, a question may be two-pronged or have several parts. Students must be trained to respond to **all** parts of the question. Another influencing factor may be that students did not understand the vocabulary used in the question. The words *tournants* and *décisives* proved difficult for some students.

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 train students not to repeat the question in their answer. Some students repeated the question several times, with a negative effect on their composition. Students should also be reminded to be concise—"la longueur ne fait pas le bonheur"—but not to make their composition too short. The intent is for students to write a composition of substantial length (a rule of thumb would be to write a response that uses the second page as well as the first).

Teachers should have their students constantly review and practice tenses; work on prepositions and verbs; and learn transition words (*puis, ensuite, après cela*, etc.) and comparative and superlative structures. More generally, teachers should offer their students practice in writing at all levels, insisting on good organization, including paragraphs and transitions.

Finally, students should be given opportunities to expand their vocabulary: for example, teachers could choose a discussion topic and have students find appropriate vocabulary with which to discuss that particular topic. Teachers should review core vocabulary with students, including synonyms and antonyms, to help them compare and contrast or debate the pros and cons of a topic or situation.

Part B: Speaking

Questions 1–3

What was the intent of these questions?

For Questions 1–3, students must give evidence of competence in dealing with various speaking tasks. The first picture sequence 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 young people who go hiking and discover when they arrive at the top of the mountain that it has been littered by other hikers. This is not what they expected to find.

Question 1 required students to recount the story presented in the pictures.

In the speaking part of the exam, questions progress from the concrete to the personal or the abstract. This year, Question 2 asked students to recount an anecdote where reality did not correspond to their expectations. This question required a more advanced response, as students were invited to personalize their answer.

Though the third question is typically framed in a more general way, it invites students to deeper thinking because it often contains a level of abstraction. This year, students were asked to say what one’s reaction should be when faced with a situation where reality does not correspond to a dream.

How well did students perform on these questions?

The Standard Group’s mean score for the first picture sequence (Questions 1–3) was 9.48 out of a possible 15 points.

What were common student errors or omissions?

For Question 1, the most important errors had to do with vocabulary in regard to the second picture, which shows the caption “Sommet ➡ 20 km.” Students who did not know the word “sommet” thought that the mountain’s name was “Sommet.” Some also thought that it was the name of a city.

Concerning Question 2, students did not understand the word “anecdote,” though this word is a cognate.

Students had difficulty with the abstract nature of Question 3, which did not allow most students to express themselves to the full extent of their abilities. Those who used the strategy of choosing an example to illustrate their point did rather well. Those who tried to answer the question on a more abstract level (typically the best students) had more difficulty.

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 endeavor to expand students' vocabulary and also teach students how to recognize cognates. Students should be encouraged to use new vocabulary words in a sentence for contextualization.

Teachers must know that one of the questions in the picture sequence, typically the third one, is always more abstract and should instruct their students accordingly. Another strategy is to train students to use an example without neglecting to prepare them to think abstractly—a quality that distinguishes the best students. Organizing class debates, for instance, would be a way of achieving this goal.

Questions 4–5

What was the intent of these questions?

The second picture sequence invited students to compare two pictures and respond to the related questions. In Question 4, students had to contrast using one's car versus using public transportation. In Question 5, students were asked if they agreed with the notion of limiting the usage of private cars.

How well did students perform on these questions?

The Standard Group's mean score for the second picture sequence (Questions 4–5) was 6.37 out of a possible 10 points.

What were common student errors or omissions?

There were no common errors or omissions. This was in part due to the fact that these were very good questions that dealt with a current issue. As a result, students could respond in an in-depth fashion.

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 advice applies to all questions in the speaking portion of the exam. From a practical point of view, students should be advised to use their allotted 60 seconds to the fullest and to practice speaking for 60 seconds so they have a good sense of how much (or little) time this is. Teachers should provide students with practice in the exam format on a regular basis, using tape recorders (or other recording equipment) so that students are accustomed to providing timed responses.

When using their own equipment, students should be reminded not to stop their machines, not to whisper, and not to chew gum while speaking.

More generally, teachers should review with students the format of the exam, demonstrating the different types of questions that call for different linguistic strategies. These include describing and narrating in the present and past, comparing two different situations, and speaking in general about what should be or might be, that is, hypothesizing and using abstract language.