



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

The following comments on the 2009 free-response questions for AP® German Language were written by the Chief Reader, Johanna Watzinger-Tharp of the University of Utah in Salt Lake City. 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–1: Writing (Paragraph Completion)

What was the intent of this question?

This part of the examination is designed to elicit precise responses that fit the context in both structure and meaning. Students demonstrate their comprehension of the passage by inserting a correct German word or words in each of the 20 blanks. The paragraph-completion task gives students the opportunity to demonstrate their vocabulary knowledge, sensitivity to structure and idiom, and precision of spelling, all within the context of the passage. This year, the items to fill in the blanks were mostly of relatively high frequency, but they were sufficiently challenging such that better students could demonstrate their ability to produce correct case endings and to select lexical items to fit the meaning of a sentence and the passage as a whole.

In developing passages, the Development Committee uses authentic materials that are then adapted to the testing purpose. The 2009 paragraph-completion task was based on a promotional text for a winter resort.

How well did students perform on this question?

The 2009 paragraph-completion task yielded a higher mean score than in the previous three years. The following table shows the mean scores from 2004 to 2009.

	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009
Possible Points	20	20	20	20	20	20
Mean Score	9.29	10.88	8.55	8.43	9.47	10.17

Readers found the paragraph-completion task to be well designed and challenging, yet appropriate for the Standard Group.* They agreed that the AP Exam should include items that require a relatively high level of proficiency. Readers also concurred that items should correspond to the level of control and knowledge that are typically expected of these kinds of structures in an intermediate-level college German course. Teachers generally consider the paragraph-completion task to be the most demanding of the free-response questions, but Readers this year felt the task was fair and suitable for measuring the exam-takers' abilities. Better students could achieve scores of 15 or higher for correct items, and few students earned very low scores or left many blanks unfilled. The higher scores this year confirm the accessibility of the passage, the generally high frequency of the items, and also the somewhat higher ability that this year's group demonstrated on the free-response part of the exam.

What were common student errors or omissions?

Students had difficulty with some of the more challenging case endings on articles and relative pronouns. As expected, they also had trouble with selecting prepositions that fit both meaning and form. Students omitted few of the items and instead attempted to fill in the blanks, even if they were obviously unsure of the meaning of specific words or phrases. In the following table "inappropriate" refers to lexical items that did not fit the meaning, while "incorrect" refers to items with grammatical (e.g., structure, spelling) errors.

Item	Correct Answers	Common Errors
1	<i>(man) hat, jedes hat, verfügt über</i>	Inappropriate verb
2	<i>im, im + modifier, in dem, jeden, in jedem, den ganzen</i>	Incorrect preposition
3	<i>der, unserer, unsrer, seiner, der eigenen</i>	Incorrect case
4	<i>mit, mittels, in, modifier + in, modifier + mit, von, hinter, neben, vor, unter, bei</i>	Inappropriate preposition
5	<i>laufen, fahren</i>	Inappropriate verb
6	<i>nicht, aber nicht, modifier + nicht</i>	Inappropriate modifier
7	<i>gibt, gibt + adverb</i>	Inappropriate verb
8	<i>können, werden, dürften, sollten, können viele, können mehrere</i>	Inappropriate verb
9	<i>sich, sich + oft, häufig, immer, immer wieder, manchmal, ständig</i>	Inappropriate item
10	<i>der, unserer, unsrer</i>	Incorrect case
11	<i>das, welches</i>	Incorrect pronoun/case
12	<i>machen, bereiten, bringen, bieten diese Verben + werden / dürften / könnten / sollten / können</i>	Inappropriate verb
13	<i>dass, daß</i>	Inappropriate item
14	<i>Nähe, Umgebung, Lobby, Bar, Halle, Mitte, modifier + Etage, näheren, Umgebung, unmittelbaren Nähe, Nachbarschaft, Anlage</i>	Inappropriate item

* The Standard Group does not include students who speak German at home or who have lived for more than one month in a country where German is the native language. Decisions on cutoff scores are based on the Standard Group. Data discussed in this report are based on the Standard Group only. Total Group and Alternate exam data are not included.

15	<i>bekommt, erhält, kriegt, hat</i>	Inappropriate verb/agreement
16	<i>man, jeder, jeder Gast, der Gast, ein Gast, jedermann, er, er oder sie, er / sie, der Urlauber</i>	Inappropriate item/incorrect item (spelling)
17	<i>als</i>	Incorrect connector
18	<i>ein, modifier (gerne, herzlich und ähnliches) + ein</i>	Incorrect item
19	<i>zu, modifier + zu</i>	Incorrect item
20	<i>auf, über, modifier (sehr, riesig, ungemein) + auf, modifier + über</i>	Inappropriate preposition

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 who give students more work with this form of exercise should expect better results on the paragraph-completion questions, because one factor in student performance is familiarity with the task. Teachers will not profit by devising cloze passages that test particular points of grammar and vocabulary. This task is an overall evaluation of language recognition and usage, and the paragraph-completion section will always contain a variety of items. What is most important is making sure that students have extensive experience with this format. A reasonable strategy is for teachers to remove every eighth or ninth word, regardless of its form, from a passage and then have students supply the missing word(s) in German; students should do a similar exercise each week. All forms of language acquisition will lead to better scores on the paragraph-completion section.

Part A–2: Writing (Composition)

What was the intent of this question?

This year’s composition topic asked students to agree or disagree and then present concrete arguments pro or con on the question of whether we live in an era without heroes (*Leben wir in einer Zeit ohne Helden?*). Anticipating that students might not be familiar with the key word *Helden* (heroes), the exam question was followed by a definition: *Helden sind Personen, die etwas riskieren, um anderen zu helfen* (Heroes are individuals who risk something in order to help others). Although well intended, the definition misled many students to focus on how they, or people they know, help others rather than on the issue of present-day heroes.

How well did students perform on this question?

The mean score for the 2009 composition question, as this table shows, was higher than the means for the previous two years but lower than the 2006 mean score.

	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009
Possible Points	9	9	9	9	9	9
Mean Score	6.32	5.16	6.00	5.31	5.62	5.65

What were common student errors or omissions?

As noted above, a number of students bypassed the actual composition topic, which was given in the form of a question in boldface immediately under the boxed instructions. Instead, they focused on the statement below the boldfaced question (a definition of the word *Helden*). Readers were trained to accept compositions that focused on helping others as a reasonable response to the prompt, so essays that addressed the definition instead of the actual prompt did not receive a score of 0 because students failed to respond to the topic.

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 most productive classroom strategy in preparation for the composition section is to conduct frequent, timed, in-class writing sessions that are evaluated according to the same scoring guidelines that are used at the Reading and are available on AP Central®. To ensure that all students are familiar with the assessment scale, many teachers involve students in evaluating their essays according to the scoring guidelines, either in groups or pairs. Composition practice should use topics that elicit arguments for or against a specific statement or that involve making comparisons. The focus should be on creating a coherent and well-organized written narrative. Although organization per se is not addressed in the scoring guidelines, a composition with well-organized paragraphs that logically follow from one to the next is more likely to result in a cohesive narrative.

Part B: Speaking (Directed Responses)

In this section students listen to six prompts in German. They are allotted 20 seconds after each prompt to respond in German. Commentary on the individual prompts and how well students performed on each one follow the two tables of mean scores for this portion of the exam.

The speaking portion of the 2009 exam, including the directed responses, proved somewhat easier than the written portion. As the following table shows, the combined mean score for this year’s six directed responses was higher than the combined mean scores for each of the five previous years.

	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009
Possible Points	36	36	36	36	36	36
Mean Score	26.13	23.61	23.67	23.81	25.76	26.26

The next table provides a comparison of the mean scores for the individual prompts for the 2009 exam and the exams for the five previous years. It shows that in 2009, students found the fifth prompt to be the most challenging and the first to be the easiest. The highest score a student could earn for each question was 6.

Directed Response	Mean 2004 Score	Mean 2005 Score	Mean 2006 Score	Mean 2007 Score	Mean 2008 Score	Mean 2009 Score
1	4.21	4.50	4.10	3.99	4.56	4.77
2	3.63	3.89	3.93	3.95	4.60	4.36
3	4.53	3.98	3.65	3.93	4.38	4.47
4	4.55	4.08	3.92	3.78	4.30	4.14
5	4.44	3.51	4.17	4.21	3.76	4.04
6	4.76	3.64	3.91	3.95	4.18	4.49

The format of a directed-response item, a spontaneous oral response to an aural prompt, can be readily employed in the classroom. With the variety of playback and recording options (MP3 players, computers, labs, etc.) that are now available to many teachers, students can practice—individually, in pairs, and in groups—responding to prompts from past AP Exams or prompts the teacher has recorded. Students can then listen to their responses and evaluate them with the guidance of their teachers. Teachers should simulate the AP Exam environment, which requires a brief, unplanned response to six discrete questions. In addition, students should be familiar with the scoring guidelines for the directed-response questions. Previously administered AP German Language Exams and their scoring guidelines can be found on AP Central.

1. Wir haben am Donnerstag keine Schule. Was für Pläne hast du? (We have no school on Thursday. What kind of plans do you have?)

What was the intent of this question?

The intent of this question was for students to supply a list with common activities such as shopping, going to the movies, and going to a park. Providing a list is considered an easy task and therefore appropriate as a response to the first of the six prompts, which is meant to ease students into the directed responses with a question that can be answered with simple language.

How well did students perform on this question?

Question 1 had the highest mean score (4.77) of the six directed-response questions. Students had few difficulties with this first question because it relied on easy vocabulary and a familiar context (“no school”), and it required uncomplicated language (a list).

What were common student errors or omissions?

Students often limited their responses to two, perhaps three, items, which did not necessarily fill the 20 seconds.

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 encourage students to think broadly. Students should also be trained to provide four or five items in response to a question designed to elicit a list so that Readers have sufficient language with which to score the response.

2. Mensch, ich warte seit zwanzig Minuten auf dich! Der Film hat schon angefangen. Wieso kommst du denn so spät? (Hey, man, I've been waiting for you for 20 minutes! The movie's started already. How come you got here so late?)

What was the intent of this question?

This question was slightly more difficult than Question 1. Students had to project themselves into the situation and to provide straightforward explanations for being late.

How well did students perform on this question?

Its mean score of 4.36 confirms that Question 2 was somewhat more difficult than Question 1, but most students were able to provide an appropriate response to the prompt.

What were common student errors or omissions?

Students often did not recognize that the prompt required them to refer to something that they had done or to something that had happened in the past.

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 provide students with strategies for recognizing questions and prompts that project into the past (e.g., expressions like *seit zwanzig Minuten*, *schon*, and *hat . . . angefangen*). One of the phrases in Question 2 employed a past tense form (*hat . . . angefangen*) that students could use as a model to formulate their response. Teachers should train students to pay attention to the specific tenses and lexical items that further mark time (e.g., time adverbs) and to use proper tense markers.

3. Ich werde ein Jahr im Ausland leben. Was denkst du, soll ich in einer Großstadt oder in einem kleinen Dorf wohnen? (I'm going to live abroad for a year. What do you think, should I live in a big city or in a little town?)

What was the intent of this question?

The intent of this “forced-choice” question was for students to express a preference and then provide reasons for their choice. The prompt was also meant to encourage students to be creative and to elicit somewhat richer language for explaining and reasoning. Students typically respond well to questions that require making a choice between two concrete items. (In this case, most students stated a preference for the big city.)

How well did students perform on this question?

The mean score for this question (4.47) was slightly higher than the mean score for Question 2. Students were able to answer the question even if they did not understand the introductory sentence. Better students used more complex language suitable for higher-level functions of providing a reason and supporting their choice.

What were common student errors or omissions?

Overall, students dealt well with the question and were able to provide arguments to support their choice. Stronger students responded to both parts (*im Ausland leben* and *Großstadt oder Kleinstadt*), while weaker students addressed only the forced choice. Some students misunderstood the word *Ausland*, treating it as a specific location rather than the general meaning of “abroad.” A specific location abroad (e.g., *Deutschland*, *Österreich*) might have been more accessible to students and helped them project themselves more fully into the situation of both going abroad *and* deciding whether to live in a big city or a small town.

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 communicate to students the particular nature of two-part questions, which typically set up a situation first and then ask students to make a comparison or take a position. A response that, in fact, addresses the context and then makes the choice or comparison is considered more appropriate and meaningful (qualities necessary for earning a score of 5) than one that bypasses the specific situation in which the choice is to be made. The notion of appropriateness is relevant to all six directed-response questions and one that teachers should remind students to consider when dealing with the situations set up by the prompts.

4. Du, ich brauche deine Hilfe—ich will, dass meine kleine Schwester auch Deutsch lernt. Was soll ich ihr sagen? (Listen, I need your help—I want my little sister to study/learn German, too. What should I say to her?)

What was the intent of this question?

This question was designed to challenge students by giving them a more complex prompt that required making suggestions and giving advice, which are higher-proficiency functions.

How well did students perform on this question?

As expected, the mean score for Question 4 (4.14) was lower than the mean score for the previous question because the directed-response prompts increase in difficulty.

What were common student errors or omissions?

Students had difficulty projecting themselves into the prompt’s complicated situation, which involved a person asking for advice from an interlocutor (the student exam-taker) on how to interest a third individual (the person’s sister) in taking German. The initial sentence, *Ich brauche deine Hilfe*, may have been too general to introduce the situation effectively and, in fact, led some students to respond with advice on how to learn German rather than how to convince someone to take up studying German.

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?

Again, teachers should alert students to the more complex questions, which follow a standard format of setting up a situation, presenting a problem or conflict, and then directly asking the exam-taker to resolve it. In other words, the second part of a question does not rephrase the first part but instead builds on it. Students have to take both parts into account when responding in order to receive the higher scores that require meaningfulness (a score of 4) or meaningfulness *and* appropriateness (a score of 5).

5. Du hast Theaterkarten für heute Abend gekauft? Wir sind doch bei Stefan zum Essen eingeladen. Was machen wir jetzt? (You bought theater tickets for tonight? But we've been invited to eat at Stefan's. What are we going to do now?)

What was the intent of this question?

This question asked students to resolve a problem, in this case theater tickets that are in conflict with a dinner invitation.

How well did students perform on this question?

Question 5 had the lowest mean score (4.04), demonstrating that it was the most difficult of the six directed-response questions.

What were common student errors or omissions?

Students often missed the cause of the conflict (i.e., theater tickets for the night of a dinner party) and how it related to the dinner invitation. Readers noted that the situation may have been of little relevance to some high school students, who seldom go to the theater or attend dinner parties.

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?

While the directed-response questions seek to present situations that students will be able to project themselves into, some questions will deal with less familiar situations. Teachers should prepare students for a range of situations, some that are more familiar but also some that students might not typically encounter.

6. Ich habe gehört, dass die neue Austauschschülerin, Angelika, in deiner Klasse ist. Was weißt du über sie? (I heard that the new exchange student, Angelika, is in your class. What do you know about her?)

What was the intent of this question?

The final prompt is designed to be easy and accessible and to elicit less complex language (in this case, some information about an exchange student).

How well did students perform on this question?

The mean score for Question 6 was 4.49, making it the highest scoring direct-response question after Question 1. This result confirms that Question 6, as intended, was one of the easier questions for students.

What were common student errors or omissions?

Students had little or no difficulty responding appropriately, though most used only physical descriptions.

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 alert students to the nature of the final directed-response question, which typically requires more basic language functions, such as giving a list and providing descriptions. Much as they do for Question 1, students should be encouraged to think broadly and to provide many different items rather than just one or two.

Part B: Speaking (Picture Series)

What was the intent of this question?

This section of the examination is designed to elicit a narrative based on six pictures and to give students the opportunity to produce connected discourse. Unlike the directed responses, which require students to produce language rapidly in response to six discrete questions, students produce the narrative after a two-minute period of reflection during which they are allowed to take notes. The six pictures represent a sequence of events, which students then narrate in greater or lesser detail. The section presupposes students' ability to name objects, relate different activities depicted, and use cohesive discourse strategies to form a narrative. The vocabulary needed to narrate the 2009 picture sequence (showing a home-baking fiasco) was of relatively high frequency but also posed some pronunciation challenges.

How well did students perform on this question?

Students were able to use the pictures to tell stories that were often nicely cohesive. As the following table indicates, students in 2009 performed better on this task than students from 2005 through 2007 but less well than students in 2008.

	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009
Possible Points	6	6	6	6	6	6
Mean Score	4.17	3.53	3.44	3.60	4.19	4.09

Overall, students were able to employ their vocabulary and structure knowledge to produce good language. Readers had no difficulty applying the scoring guidelines for consistent scoring and, as would be expected, rarely gave a score of 0.

What were common student errors or omissions?

Students readily related to the content and context of the pictures (home, baking, burning a cake, going to the bakery). They employed vocabulary commonly used in German classes, although certain closely related German words that were key to the story proved difficult to distinguish and to pronounce correctly. On the other hand, those items also differentiated stronger students from weaker ones. The details in the pictures (cat, kitchen items, etc.) allowed weaker students to focus on describing objects, while better students focused more on rendering a cohesive story and even dramatizing the event. Much as in previous years, students continued to improve in their ability to narrate and to employ their lexical and grammatical knowledge effectively.

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 focus students' attention on narrating rather than describing each picture one by one. They might want to advise students to use cohesive devices to connect the events and create a story, avoiding explicit reference to each picture frame (e.g., "In Picture 1 . . . , in Picture 2 . . ."). Again, the goal of this section is narration, not picture description. Students benefit most from firsthand experience with producing spoken narratives of a certain length and from guidance by teachers on how to use cohesive devices effectively. The scoring guidelines can further serve to alert students to elements that are critical to creating a story and to ways in which to achieve fluency.