



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

The following comments on the 2009 free-response questions for AP® Psychology were written by the Chief Reader, Kenneth D. Keith of the University of San Diego in California. 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?

This question reflected the intention of the Psychology Development Committee to require critical analysis and application of concepts across multiple subfields within psychology. Thus the question (about a couple learning a new dance routine) required students to go beyond definition of terms to analysis of potential application of concepts from the areas of motivation, learning, memory, biological psychology, sensation/perception, cognition, and personality.

How well did students perform on this question?

The mean score was 3.05 out of a possible 7 points. There was a reasonably normal distribution of scores across the entire range.

What were common student errors or omissions?

Students characteristically have some difficulty distinguishing between punishment and negative reinforcement, and that tendency could be seen in responses to this question.

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 distinction between punishment and negative reinforcement should be made clear to students. Perhaps more important, teachers need to prepare students to analyze applied problems and to use theoretical concepts to solve problems.

Question 2

What was the intent of this question?

This question also required analysis and application. Students were asked to relate some concepts (cognitive, brain-based behavior, learning, and industrial/organizational) to a set of complex motor behaviors (driving) and to apply other concepts (brain-based behavior, testing, and memory) to a written test in the same domain.

How well did students perform on this question?

This question proved a bit more difficult than Question 1: the mean score was 2.70 out of a possible 7 points. Despite being more difficult, this question also produced a reasonably normal distribution of scores.

What were common student errors or omissions?

The most difficult concept addressed by this question was human factors. Although this is perhaps not the most salient concept in an introductory psychology course, it is important and its inclusion clearly served to separate the very top students from others taking this exam. This is a topic that may be given less time than many others in AP Psychology courses, and the difficulty of the concept was magnified by the requirement that students analyze a practical problem and apply the concept (along with others) to that problem.

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 with Question 1, teachers should note this trend toward analysis and application and ensure that students are prepared for the exam by practicing questions that require analysis and problem solving throughout the AP Psychology course.