



Student Performance Q&A: 2001 AP[®] Spanish Literature Section II

The following comments are provided by the Chief Faculty Consultant regarding the 2001 free-response questions for AP Spanish Literature. *They are intended to assist AP workshop consultants as they develop training sessions to help teachers better prepare their students for the AP Exams.* They give an overview of each question and its performance, 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 included. Consultants are encouraged to use their expertise to create strategies for teachers to improve student performance in specific areas.

Note: The grading criteria for the AP Spanish Literature Examination recognizes both the **content** (70%) and the appropriateness and accuracy of the **language** (30%) of the responses. With respect to the latter criterion, the exam is designed to test the ability of students to write well-organized essays in correct and idiomatic Spanish. Further, the scoring guidelines assess **the degree to which language usage supports the content of the essays.**

Question 1. Poetry Analysis: “Canción amarga” (Burgos)

What was intended by the question?

The question was intended to elicit a well-developed essay that illustrates the relationship between the poem’s title and its content. An important element in the question was the requirement that the student provide an accurate and thorough analysis of the poetic language and devices used by the poet. The exam also tests the ability of students to write “well-organized essays in correct and idiomatic Spanish.” Further, the scoring criteria assesses the **degree to which language usage effectively communicates an appropriate response to the question.**

How well did the students perform?

The poem appeared to have been accessible to students. The number of vocabulary items that were related to “amarga” (and, therefore, to one of the main aspects of the question) undoubtedly were a factor to this accessibility. Based on students’ performance it appears that teachers are training students to deal with formal aspects of poetry with considerable more success than in the past.

What were common errors or omissions?

Some essays tended to be descriptive rather than analytic and failed to discuss the relationship between content and form, theme and poetic devices. Because Burgos’ poem had an abstract

quality to it; i.e., spoke of metaphysical and/or philosophical concerns, it lent itself to a considerable range of interpretations. The best essays showed accurate and insightful analysis of the treatment of the main theme and addressed the different levels of interpretation: the role of the poet, the futility of poetry and, in a more general way, dealing with one's existence. They also included a discussion of the tone and the many metaphors and imagery used to effectively communicate a sense of despair. Some students stayed within the anecdotal or descriptive level.

How can students improve their performance in this area?

- Students must have sufficient exposure to different examples of poetic discourse. Experience in reading poetry, in recognizing main themes and their development throughout the poem, and in identifying technical devices and their function is imperative to attain high scores.
- The essays must demonstrate insight and analytical ability. A careful analysis (poetic devices, tone, language, themes) of short segments or stanzas of different poems should be part of every classroom practice before proceeding to analyze complete poems.
- The language component in the students' essays is important and constitutes 30% of the score of the whole essay. In addition to control of grammatical structures and command of the conventions of the written language (organization: premise/thesis>elaboration>conclusion) precise and accurate language (including technical or literary terminology) should predominate in these essays. Have students become as familiar as possible with literary terminology and practice writing and rewriting short essays as part of a refining process.

Question 2. Single author: Borges

What was intended by the question?

The question intended to elicit a well-developed essay that analyzes the way in which Borges treats the theme of violence in his works. A minimum of two works by the author needed to be analyzed. A clear demonstration of insight and analytical ability was expected in a well-focused and thorough essay. Analysis was expected to outweigh description.

How well did the students perform?

This question proved to be the most difficult for the majority of the students. While the question appears fairly accessible on the surface, the openness of the term "violencia" may have introduced a deceptively difficult aspect to it. Similarly, by asking the student to discuss the author's "treatment" of violence, the question required a certain level of perceptiveness and sophistication that only the most experienced students (in terms of knowledge of Borges and of literary analysis) were able to reach.

What were common errors or omissions?

In many students' responses, description seemed to outweigh analysis. While it was clear that students had read the material and could give plot summaries comfortably, analytic insight, capability to move from the concrete to the abstract, to synthesize and make important generalizations about Borges' treatment of violence were often missing. In addition, essays were not always well focused or organized, which detracted from the overall quality of the answer.

How can students improve their performance in this area?

- Students are advised to use plot descriptions sparsely and mainly to illustrate or clarify a particular point in the question or the theme represented in the works selected, not simply to demonstrate that they know the plot line. They should concentrate more on text analysis,

including language and tone, characterizations and symbolic representations to support a given premise. In this case, the different ways in which violence is represented in Borges' works—ranging from the local or regional (e.g., “El Sur”) to the universal (e.g., “La muerte y la brújula” and “El jardín de senderos que se bifurcan”) to even the biblical—using different symbolic representations to suggest that history is permeated by violence in a repetitive, never-ending fashion, may have been one possible approach to this question.

- A well-developed essay includes not only thorough analysis of appropriate examples but coherence and language to support content. A premise or series of premises, followed by support of the premise(s) and an overall conclusion are essential elements in the organization of a well-rounded essay. At the higher levels of performance, the essay must convincingly explain and demonstrate how Borges deals with the theme of violence in the works discussed.

Question 3. Critical Excerpt Analysis: Unamuno

What was intended by the question?

Using a critical excerpt selected from Pablo Carrasco's introduction to Unamuno's *Niebla*, the question intended to elicit a well-developed essay that analyzed how at least two of Carrasco's ideas are reflected in Unamuno's works. The question also required that the student refer to at least two of Unamuno's works. A clear demonstration of insight and analytical ability was expected in a well-focused and thorough essay.

How well did the students perform?

Questions that include quotations are inherently challenging in so far as they add an additional element to be addressed in the response; e.g., the content of the quotation and the analysis of the author's works. Still, and to their credit, students performed relatively well in this question and definitely better than on Question 2.

What were common errors or omissions?

The most common error had to do with the way the students approached the quote: many referred only to the portion of the quote — the issue of doubt — leaving aside several other important ideas such as suggested by the words “agonía,” “confrontación dialéctica,” “la dimensión espiritual. y psíquica y social [del hombre].” In other words, several students made only limited, very partial use of a quote that was deliberately rich in ideas. This type of question has been on the examination for several years, but it appears that students are not yet well trained to focus on the quote and its possibilities. Also, as it often happens, many essays focused on plot summary instead of analysis.

How can students improve performance in this area?

- Students must strive to demonstrate insight and analytical ability in a well-focused and thorough essay. Analysis must outweigh description and plot summary.
- Practice with critical excerpts, where students analyze the quotes, extract the main idea or ideas and apply it (or them) in practice essays with reference to the works of a given author, could be helpful.