



Student Performance Q&A: 2003 AP[®] Spanish Language Free-Response Questions

The following comments on the 2003 free-response questions for AP[®] Spanish Language were written by the Chief Reader, Rita Goldberg of St. Lawrence University in Canton, New York. 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: Paragraph Completion and Fill-Ins

What was the intent of this question?

This part of the exam tests discrete language items in context and centers on specific grammar points. The first section consisted of a paragraph about a poinsettia followed by blanks that needed to be filled in with an appropriate form of the base word. This year's items primarily called for noun/adjective agreements, spelling changes, and pronoun forms. The second section contained 10 separate sentences with a blank to be filled in with the necessary form of the verb. This year's items included several subjunctives, an infinitive after a preposition, a gerund, and a preterite. Accuracy is essential in the fill-ins.

How well did students perform on this question?

The mean score for the Standard Group was 9.58 out of a possible 20 points.* The mean score for all students was 11.28 out of a possible 20 points. Scores were somewhat better this year than last. The mean score was only slightly higher, but there were more perfect scores (though not many) and fewer scores of 0.

What were common student errors or omissions?

Accents are one of the *bête-noirs* of this section. As always, some students included accents where they were not needed (*jardines*, #5) while omitting them where they were necessary (*intuía* or *había*, #14). Vocabulary was an issue in #3, since some students thought "*estadounidense*" was a reflexive verb. Curiously, a number of students substituted the word "*terminar*" for "*finalizar*" in #12. The gerund (#16) was problematic, as was the subjunctive that was required in several of the items.

* The Standard Group does not include students who speak the language at home or who have lived for more than two months in a country where Spanish is the native language.

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 need to follow the directions carefully. In the paragraph completion section, only one word is allowed. However, in the 10 fill-in sentences, when necessary, students may use a compound tense or a reflexive verb and the related pronoun. Adding periphrastic verbs, such as *ir a*, is not acceptable and will result in a response being scored as incorrect. If students elect to provide several responses, all of the responses must be in the correct order for the item to be considered correct. Also, even if a word does not change, it must be written into the space provided because blanks are scored as incorrect — readers cannot guess a student’s intentions when there is a blank. Students should check their work in order to avoid careless spelling errors. Students should also read each item carefully in order to understand the context. In the paragraph completion, they should read the entire paragraph before starting to write their answers.

A review of the following areas could be beneficial:

- noun/adjective and subject/verb agreements,
- rules for accents and spelling changes,
- verb conjugations,
- use of the subjunctive,
- sequence of tenses,
- rules for identifying gender of nouns, and
- rules for forming the masculine and feminine plurals.

Question 2: Composition

What was the intent of this question?

This section tests students’ ability to write an essay of at least 200 words on a given topic. This year students were asked to discuss their views on the relative importance of life experience versus education. Although some students clearly felt they needed to tell readers what they thought the readers wanted to read, most of them found the topic accessible and relevant to their interests.

How well did students perform on this question?

The mean score for the Standard Group was 4.36 out of a possible nine points. The mean score for all students was 4.94 out of a possible nine points. Most students understood the prompt well and were able to write an essay on the subject provided. The mean score was slightly lower this year than last, and there were fewer scores of 0, probably because the topic was so accessible. On the other hand, there were also few scores of 9.

What were common student errors or omissions?

The problems students encountered with this section included:

- failing to discuss the topic fully or wandering from the topic;
- restating the topic without adequate development of ideas;
- offering few insights and little originality;
- showing the lack of a clear introduction or thesis statement;
- showing poor organization;
- showing limited use of transitions between paragraphs and ideas;

- using informal, oral language instead of a more formal writing style;
- using a narrow range of vocabulary and only very basic language structures;
- using excessive repetition of ideas, vocabulary, and structures;
- including many grammar, spelling, and vocabulary errors; and
- using many anglicisms.

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 need frequent essay-writing practice and benefit from learning how to evaluate their own writing. Teachers can use the composition rubric to grade students and instruct them in how to apply it.

Creativity and risk taking often lead to high scores, but they must be handled judiciously. Help students understand that, although playing it safe may yield a satisfactory score, they should not feel obligated to suppress their opinions and personality in favor of what they think the readers expect. The best essays are those in which a *person* comes through.

Students should make sure their essays have an introduction and a conclusion that does not merely restate the introduction and summarize the main ideas. Most compositions also require a thesis, though there is room for creativity. Focused essays written in good Spanish and with good content and organization earn high scores.

For some students, the standard five-paragraph essay works well. However, this type of essay is not a requirement for the AP Spanish Language Exam.

Students should learn to vary the vocabulary and structures in their compositions and to use appropriate transitional expressions. Many teachers give their students a list of words and expressions to use in their writing.

Because each year there are a few students who write about the instructions instead of the prompt, during the year make sure students see an actual exam and discuss how the prompt is set up on the page.

Encourage students to use the allotted time to think about their composition before beginning to write. They may want to prepare a brief outline, though this is not required. They should *not* write out a full draft because sometimes they run out of time when copying the draft to the exam booklet, making their essays incomplete.

Essays should be at least 200 words long. There is nothing to be gained from writing very wordy or poorly organized four- or five-page essays.

Train students to edit their work and, when taking the exam, to leave some time to review what they have written. Spelling (including accents), vocabulary, grammar, and punctuation are all important, and content and organization are, of course, fundamental.

Question 3: Picture Sequence

What was the intent of this question?

The picture sequence aims to elicit from students a sustained narrative using a variety of vocabulary and narrative strategies.

How well did students perform on this question?

The mean score for the Standard Group was 4.51 out of a possible nine points. The mean score for all students was 6.41 out of a possible nine points. Students who are prepared in terms of language skills and storytelling ability tend to do well on this section. This year there was a good spread of scores.

What were common student errors or omissions?

Rapid, superficial narration indicated a lack of linguistic resources for providing a sustained narration. Some students went from picture to picture, describing each, in some cases even saying, “En el primer dibujo,” “en el segundo dibujo,” and so on. The goal is to tell the story, not describe the pictures. Some students spoke so quickly and with so little detail that they used only a minute or less of the allotted two minutes. One point was deducted from these responses. In some cases, description prevailed over narration, especially with students who lacked vocabulary that could help them link the frames.

Other problems included:

- choppy, hesitant speech,
- an inability to link sentences and concepts with appropriate expressions,
- very simple structures and limited vocabulary,
- little use of circumlocution,
- so many errors in vocabulary and structures that comprehension was affected, and
- poor pronunciation.

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?

Help students understand the nature of narration and stress that the exam asks them to tell a story, not merely describe the pictures.

Students should use the prep time prior to recording to examine all the drawings. This will help them avoid getting stuck in the middle of speaking because they have not used the time to work through the story to the end.

Students should practice using the allotted time to the fullest. It is important that they have a sense of how long two minutes is.

Practice circumlocution and paraphrasing throughout the year so that students have resources for responding when more precise vocabulary does not come to mind.

Provide students with a list of linking words and expressions and practice them.

Review basic vocabulary and do activities intended to broaden students’ vocabulary.

Practice oral narration in more contexts than just the AP Exam. The extended discourse required by oral presentations provides good practice for the exam.

Train students (and the proctor) not to stop and start recording during the speaking sections of the exam. This procedure is not allowed and it may adversely affect student outcomes.

Be sure students have an opportunity to practice on the same equipment they will be using for the exam. Work with the proctor to test the equipment beforehand. Ensure that the proctor has a thorough understanding of the exam's structure and knows when to start and stop the tape or CD according to the instructions in the Coordinator's Manual.

Consider the testing situation. Are students spaced far enough apart that they are not distracted by hearing each other? Is the room quiet, without noise from outside and free from the threat of bells, announcements, and other interferences from the school's speaker system? Readers hear many recordings in which students have recorded in noisy and inappropriate conditions.

Question 4: Directed Responses

What was the intent of this question?

The five questions in the directed responses section provide a simulated conversation on a single topic. This year the directed responses were about the environment or "medio ambiente." Since, as usual, each question was more complex than the preceding one, students needed to respond at a higher cognitive or skill level for each.

How well did students perform on this question?

The mean score for the Standard Group for all five directed responses was 10.69 out of a possible 20 points. The mean score for all students for all five directed responses was 14.12 out of a possible 20 points. Scores this year were a little lower than last in part because this year's subject proved more challenging than last year's on film. Some students did not appear to understand "medio ambiente," even though broad interpretations of this term were accepted. In addition, though the questions did not seek to elicit a variety of tenses, the content required more thoughtful responses than last year.

What were common student errors or omissions?

The problems students encountered included:

- not recognizing or misunderstanding vocabulary ("medio ambiente," "reciclaje"),
- providing inappropriate or incomplete responses because of lack of vocabulary,
- omitting questions,
- not using most of the 20 seconds for the responses,
- failing to answer the questions thoroughly,
- making many errors in basic structures (e.g., verb conjugations, agreements, possessives),
- not knowing how to use commands or other strategies for convincing a friend (#3), and
- getting stuck when trying to use the subjunctive or a circumlocution (#5).

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?

Practice with the equipment that will be used on the day of the exam so that students and the proctor are all familiar with it. Be sure the proctor understands that the tape or CD should not be stopped after each question.

Make sure the exam is administered in an appropriate room without distracting noises like bells and announcements or loud outdoor activities.

Separate students so that they are not distracted by hearing each other.
Practice the format of the exam.

Practice filling the time. It is only 20 seconds.

Help students practice saying something in response to the question even though they may not have understood it perfectly.

Help students master verbs and vocabulary beyond the most basic level.

Practice circumlocution.

During the year provide many situations, such as debates and interviews, that require spontaneous but thoughtful responses in Spanish.

Expose students to a variety of voices, speakers, and accents.