



Student Performance Q&A: 2008 AP[®] Spanish Language Free-Response Questions

The following comments on the 2008 free-response questions for AP[®] Spanish Language were written by the Chief Reader, Gwyn E. Campbell of Washington and Lee University in Lexington, Virginia. 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: Paragraph Completion

What was the intent of this question?

This section of the exam assesses students' knowledge of grammar and language use in an authentic context. It consists of two categories of exercises in which students fill in the blanks: the first category gives a passage for which root words have been provided, and the second has two passages without root words. Answers have to be completely accurate in order to be correct. Students can earn 1 point for each correct answer for a total possible score of 20 on this section.

Paragraph completion with root words: For the first paragraph-completion exercises (items 1–10), students were required to fill in 10 blanks with the correct forms of the root words that were provided. At times students needed to write more than one word, as indicated in the directions in English and Spanish. The passage for this year's exam, from bolivianet.com/arte, discussed the first exposition of contemporary Bolivian art on the Internet. Correct answers included two infinitives, two past participles, several adjectives, one adverb, one definite article, and one present subjunctive verb form (although the present perfect subjunctive was admissible as well).

Paragraph completions without root words: In the second set of exercises (items 11–20), students were limited to one-word answers that were correct logically and grammatically, as indicated in the one set of instructions, again written in both languages. The passage for items 11–15 came from the online version of ECOS de España y Latinoamérica and discussed the production of shoes in Spain. The passage for items 16–20 appeared on BBCMundo.com and discussed the placement of the hippopotamus and the polar bear on the Endangered Species List. The correct answers included definite and indefinite articles, several conjunctions, prepositions, a relative

pronoun, one contraction, and a verb form. In a few instances—question 19, for example—several correct answers were possible, corresponding to authentic usage in context.

How well did students perform on this question?

The mean score for the Total Group was 12.15 out of 20 possible points. The mean score for the Standard Group* was 11.12, only fractionally lower than the mean score of 11.24 received by the Standard Group in 2007, the first year of the new AP Spanish Language Exam. The 2008 mean score for the Total Group was close to half of a percent point higher than the mean score of 11.76 for the Total Group in 2007.

What were common student errors or omissions?

At times students supplied more than one possible answer, but in such cases both answers had to be completely correct in order to receive a credit of 1 point. Frequent errors occurred in spelling and the use of accents, especially misplaced accents; question 15 (*según*) required the written accent. Students also had many problems with adjective agreement in questions 1, 4, and 7. Additionally, many students did not recognize the need to form an adverb from *preciso* in question 2. Failure to recognize the need for the infinitive form of *decir* and *apreciar* was a common mistake. Other students had difficulty determining which form of *deber* to use in question 9 and the need for a form of *haber* in the present perfect construction in question 14. Some did not identify the need for the present subjunctive in question 10, and others failed to recognize the need for the relative pronoun *que* in question 18. Yet other students did not correctly choose the feminine singular definite article *la* in question 5, nor did they form the contraction *del* in question 20. The most common problems by far involved the need for various prepositions in questions 12, 13, 15, 16, and 17.

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?

It is always a good idea to teach students to read the exam directions carefully. In the first section (questions 1–10), the directions stated that more than one word may be used, such as a reflexive construction or a compound tense of a verb (*haber dicho* is a possible answer to question 3, *haber apreciado* is a possible answer to question 8, and *haya sido* is acceptable for question 10). In the short excerpts that were the second and third selections, only one word was allowed. Progressive verb tenses and periphrastic constructions were therefore not acceptable for questions 11–20.

Even if the form is identical to the prompt in parentheses, as in questions 3 and 8, the word must be written in the blank. Writing “*no cambia*” or “no change” or drawing an arrow from the prompt to the blank is considered an error, and Readers score these responses as incorrect. Teach students not only to write the correct form when it is identical to that in the prompt but also encourage them to supply an educated guess when they are in doubt. Such a strategy will at least give them a chance of writing the correct answer or a correct answer when more than one is possible.

* The Standard Group does not include students who speak Spanish at home or who have lived for more than one month in a country where Spanish is the native language. Decisions on cutoff scores are based on the Standard Group.

Teachers would do well to train their students to read the entire passage or paragraph before they start filling in the blanks. This will help students gain a good understanding of each question and its context. Students should also make it a habit to allow time to proofread their work in order to correct errors in spelling and grammar.

Teachers should instruct students to supply a single answer to each item. Although some items have several correct answers (e.g., *las*, *sus*, and *estas* in number 19), writing more than one answer increases a student's chance of error. It is important that students have the opportunity to do these exercises under conditions and time constraints that are similar to those of the AP Exam.

Frequent work on the following language areas can also be helpful:

- Accents must be written correctly and clearly. An accent over a consonant, two accents in a word, unclear placement of an accent (e.g., between two vowels), and words missing their required accents are all incorrect. Students will find it helpful to learn the division of words into syllables as well as the guidelines for when the stress falls on the last or penultimate syllable.
- Identifying the gender of nouns
- Noun–adjective and subject–verb agreement
- Verb conjugations and routinely identifying the stem of a given tense as part of the process of learning verb tenses
- Use of function words, such as prepositions, conjunctions, and relative pronouns
- Sequencing of verb tenses

Part A: Interpersonal Writing

What was the intent of this question?

This question was intended to measure students' abilities to create an informal communication with proper register, while responding appropriately to all four parts of the prompt. Students had 10 minutes to read the prompt and to write a response that was at least 60 words in length. The prompt asked them to imagine that they were graduating from high school and to write a letter to a teacher who had had a positive influence on their school lives. Students had to include four things in the letter: their motive for writing; the teacher's importance in their life at school; their plans for the future; and a farewell, with thanks, to the teacher. Responses were scored on effective task completion, topic development, and language use.

How well did students perform on this question?

The mean score for the Total Group was 3.37 out of 5 possible points; this score was fractionally higher than the mean score of 3.22 earned by the Total Group in 2007. The mean score for the Standard Group was 3.02, an improvement when compared to the mean score of 2.89 received by this group in 2007.

What were common student errors or omissions?

The vocabulary was relatively high frequency, and the prompt lent itself to a variety of structures and tenses, even in a short letter. The prompt itself made it difficult to do anything other than successfully complete the task. Nonetheless, not all of the required points of the communication were incorporated. Some students neglected to include the opening greeting, while others omitted the required expression that was the final item of the task. Confusion and/or inconsistency of register were the most common errors.

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?

It is necessary for students to gain experience with a variety of forms or tasks of interpersonal writing while keeping in mind the occasions for writing them. The format and content of e-mails, for example, are different from those of congratulatory notes, notes that express regret or propose plans, or written messages between family and friends. Students also need to be aware that interpersonal writing is in a register that is distinct from that of presentational writing but that correct language and grammar usage are still important.

Teachers can help their students by:

- Providing regular opportunities for students to work on interpersonal writing in different registers, with routine editing for consistency
- Conducting a review of letter-writing protocol, including opening greetings and closing salutations in a variety of registers and interpersonal forums

Part A: Presentational Writing

What was the intent of this question?

This question asked students to comprehend, organize, synthesize, and integrate three different sources in a cohesive response to a specific prompt about the impact of commerce and international investments in several countries around the world. Students were required to use information from all of the sources to support their ideas. The instructions, in both English and Spanish, asked them to identify the sources as they used them in their answers. Students were also advised to avoid simply summarizing the sources individually. Students were scored on effective task completion, topic development, and language use, equally considered.

This writing sample was based on three sources, including both print and audio material. The first print source was “De Nueva Delhi a Brasilia,” an article from BBCMundo.com suggesting that India should look to Brazil for various ways to stimulate Indian commerce. The second print source was “Intel aumenta inversiones en China,” another article from BBCMundo.com that explained a U.S. company’s investment in China and the reasons for such a global move. The third source was an audio file from Radio Naciones Unidas, “China, India y América Latina, un juego económico con ventajas y desventajas,” which dealt with economic interplay among the countries mentioned.

Students had 7 minutes to read the printed material, and they listened to the audio selection for approximately 3 minutes. They were instructed to take 5 minutes to plan their responses and then 40 minutes to write an essay of about 200 words.

How well did students perform on this question?

The highest possible score for this presentational writing section was 5 points. The mean score for the Total Group was 2.88, which compares to an almost identical mean score—2.84— for this same group on the previous year’s exam. The mean score of 2.86 for the Standard Group in 2008 was fully comparable with that of the Total Group and was fractionally higher than the mean score of 2.81 earned by the Standard Group on the 2007 exam.

Overall, the combined mean score for the writing portion (paragraph completion and presentational writing) of the exam was 18.39 out of 30 possible points for the Total Group, an increase over the mean score of 17.82 on the 2007 exam. The 2008 combined mean score for the Standard Group was 17, a slim increase from the Standard Group’s mean score of 16.94 in 2007.

What were common student errors or omissions?

Many students found the third source, the audio file from Radio Naciones Unidas, difficult, so they predominantly referred to the first two print sources. There was, therefore, over-heavy reliance on two printed sources instead of all three sources. Additionally, when citing or referring to the print sources, many students apparently confused the concepts of “citing” or “referring to” with “copying.” Furthermore, many students seemed unfamiliar with the concepts of—or the differences between—“summary” and “synthesis.” For task completion, then, the most frequent error was relying on only two sources.

With respect to topic development, the aforementioned difficulty of a lack of synthesis of all three sources was the most common error. Some essays were hampered by poor organization. As far as language use was concerned, the written responses of a number of students showed errors in grammar, insufficient vocabulary, and/or problems with the conventions of the written language. Use of the correct register for this presentational task was also a problem for 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?

Students will benefit from ongoing work with as many authentic audio sources as possible, and the sources should offer a wide variety of topics, accents, and so forth. This should include listening for the general gist of the audio message while taking brief notes. Students need to do this exercise periodically under the same time restrictions and conditions as those of the exam proper.

Additional beneficial methods include helping students become accustomed to writing a solid introduction to their essays, as well as a conclusion that is more than a mere restatement of the prompt or the previous sentences. Teachers can further help their students by discussing and giving concrete examples of proper referencing of print materials, along with discussing and illustrating the differences between summary and synthesis. Helping students learn the skill of prewriting or the organizational steps in the process of creating a good presentational writing sample is also valuable.

Part B: Interpersonal Speaking

What was the intent of this question?

This task assessed interpersonal communication skills by eliciting responses based on a recorded, simulated conversation and an outline that asked students to perform different linguistic tasks throughout the conversation. Students were given the following prompt: *Has solicitado un puesto como aprendiz en la emisora de televisión Nuestravisión. Imagina que recibes una llamada telefónica de la directora de la estación para hablar sobre el trabajo.* They had 30 seconds to read the outline of the conversation; then they listened to a recorded message giving a brief explanation of the situation. Students then had 1 minute to read the outline again and to prepare their responses. To fully address this task, students had to be engaged in the conversation and to connect their responses to the prompts of the recorded speaker.

How well did students perform on this question?

The mean score for this year's Total Group was 3.68 out of 5 possible points, and for the Standard Group the mean score was 2.81. These results are relatively static when compared to the mean scores on the 2007 exam: 3.75 for the Total Group and 2.89 for the Standard Group.

Claims and evidence were embedded in and reflected by the prompts within the conversation. The essential vocabulary reflected a simulated job interview. This situation required formal register, thus challenging students to express themselves accordingly in an interview situation. Students may not have interviewed for a job, so many responses presented problems of correct register (not demonstrating accurate social and/or cultural references); however, in the vast majority of instances, the prompts enabled students to accomplish the task. Samples conveyed that students were able to respond with appropriate vocabulary as required/suggested by the task. The prompts reflected a variety of verb tenses but predominately the present and future, with occasional use of the conditional.

The third prompt required students to elaborate on what they had already addressed; however, many students found this task to be difficult and merely restated their answer to the second prompt. The fourth prompt presented the challenge of having to provide an excuse and develop an alternative time to meet. As a result, the task became more difficult because of the two components of the prompt. In general, this task worked well, as the range of scores indicates.

What were common student errors or omissions?

Common errors or omissions included not identifying and sustaining proper register, inability to be creative in addressing the second prompt and merely recycling the vocabulary of the prompt, and not offering an appropriate alternative as solicited by the fourth prompt.

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?

Simulation of the testing environment throughout the year will familiarize students with the format of the exam. Past experience has indicated that simulation helps students to achieve higher scores. Teachers can simulate this task by creating comparable telephone conversations and using them often in class under the time constraints and conditions of the AP Exam.

Students, teachers, and proctors should be familiar with the examination protocol, the mechanics of the exam, and the operation of the equipment prior to the actual exam. Since AP policy prevents AP Spanish teachers from proctoring this exam, they need to work with school authorities and the proctor to prevent distractions while students are recording. Some students stop and start the machines, perhaps to think and create answers. As clearly stated on the master CD, once the student begins to record, the machine should not be turned off until indicated. Doing so could result in a student being suspected of a security violation.

Given the increase in the use of recordings on CDs, schools should consult the *AP Coordinator's Manual*, the *AP Examination Instructions* book, and AP Central® several months prior to the administration of this exam to ensure that students' responses will be *recorded properly* and therefore scored accurately.

Part B: Presentational Speaking

What was the intent of this question?

The second part of the speaking section was an interpretive and presentational task. Students had to give a presentation in a formal academic setting, integrating the following skills: reading, listening, and speaking. They were asked to develop the topic using the strategy of comparison and contrast. Students were expected to demonstrate command of Spanish linguistic skills. The prompt asked: *Compara las semejanzas y las diferencias de las vidas y la producción artística de los músicos Carlos Santana y Gustavo Santaolalla*. Students referred to two sources. The written source was "Lo de Santana es todo natural" from BBCMundo.com. The audio file about Santaolalla was also from BBCMundo.com. Students had 5 minutes to read the printed source before listening to the recording. They were then given 2 minutes to prepare their presentation and 2 minutes to speak.

How well did students perform on this question?

The mean score for the Total Group on this presentational question was 3.57 out of 5 possible points, almost one half of a point higher than the Total Group's score of 3.13 in 2007. The 2008 Standard Group also had a higher mean score, 3.18 versus 2.89 in 2007.

The overall combined mean scores for the speaking portion (interpersonal and presentational) of the 2008 exam were 7.25 out of 10 possible points for the Total Group and 5.99 for the Standard Group. Both groups received higher mean scores this year, compared to the 2007 scores of 6.88 for the Total Group and 5.77 for the Standard Group.

What were common student errors or omissions?

Students tended to summarize the information that was presented, rather than comparing and contrasting. They also relied on the printed article more often than on the audio source. They need to be able to refer to and integrate both sources during this oral presentation. Organization and cohesiveness play a major role in this part of the exam, and some students were unable to succeed with either component. In addition, some students read directly from the printed source; others had labored or halting expression and/or poor pronunciation. In some cases lack of control (e.g., verb conjugation, agreements) was in evidence. This lack of control could have influenced students' ability to complete the task and develop 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?

During the course of the year, simulation of the testing environment will familiarize students with the format of the exam. Past experience has indicated that simulation helps students to achieve higher scores. Students, teachers, and proctors should be familiar with the operation of equipment and examination protocol prior to the actual exam.

Teachers should help students learn synthesizing skills and techniques for comparing and contrasting without direct quotations. They need to reemphasize reading for meaning and strengthen students' ability to reproduce information verbally and in their own words. Teachers should also give students opportunities to do presentational speaking, so that students are aware of the proper register required for a formal presentation. In addition, social and/or cultural references must be defined so that students will be aware of both in the written article and the auditory selection.

Throughout the course, teachers should provide opportunities for students to hear and to read authentic sources representing all Spanish-speaking countries. These sources may include films, documentaries, speeches, interviews, online newspapers, and magazines, among others. Teachers should familiarize themselves with the plethora of materials available to them on the Internet and AP Central.