



## Student Performance Q&A: 2009 AP<sup>®</sup> World History Free-Response Questions

The following comments on the 2009 free-response questions for AP<sup>®</sup> World History were written by the Chief Reader, Merry Wiesner-Hanks of the University of Wisconsin–Milwaukee, and Question Leaders Tim Keirn of California State University in Long Beach; Mee-Ae Kim of The College of Idaho in Caldwell; and Ryba Epstein of Rich East High School in Park Forest, Illinois. 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?*

The intent of the document-based question (DBQ) was to analyze African responses to European imperialism during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Unlike the pattern of most recent DBQs, these documents could not be simply “jigsawed” into categories of response. Many of the nine documents (most notably 3, 4, 6, and 7) had internal evidence that demonstrated multiple African responses. Given the richness and diversity of the sources, students could use individual documents in a variety of ways to represent different African responses to European imperialism. The multiple responses to be drawn from the documents included:

- Violent resistance (Documents 4, 5, 7, 8, and 9)
- “Nonviolent” calls for resistance (Documents 2, 6, 7, and 8)
- Diplomacy (Documents 1, 2, and 3)
- Accommodation/submission to European demands (Documents 1, 4, 6, and 7)
- Resort to tradition (Documents 2, 3, 5, 6, and 8)

Attribution for the individual documents was clear and provided ample opportunities for discussion of point of view. In addition, missing points of view provided opportunity for analysis of potential additional documents and sources. The background information was clear and informative; students did not confuse it with the documents.

Readers who scored this question were enthusiastic in their general agreement that this was an excellent DBQ. Students were given the opportunity to construct arguments in myriad ways with evidence of responses found internally within the same document(s). It was efficiently and accurately scored.

### ***How well did students perform on this question?***

The mean score was 2.62 out of a possible 9 points, much higher than the mean of 2.03 in 2008 and at about the same level as the mean of 2.84 in 2007. The number of students who earned scores of 7, 8, or 9 (2.9 percent) was also higher than in 2008 (0.9 percent).

Given the extent of evidence to be found within each document, students demonstrated a broad spectrum of strategies without any clear pattern or tendency in grouping the documents. Students were able to discern a multiplicity of responses from evidence across and within a variety of documents. While most grouped the documents around the topics of diplomacy and resistance, many stronger essays created distinct subgroupings within these overarching themes (e.g., making distinctions between the call for resistance and evidence of violent reaction). Students with reasonable writing skills were able to craft acceptable thesis statements plausibly drawn from the documents that identified multiple African responses to European imperialism. Students were allowed to demonstrate basic understanding of the documents through accurate grouping or discussion of European actions, and this was the most widely earned core point on the question. The evidence core point proved more difficult and is discussed in the following section.

When students remembered to address point of view, they generally did so with competence when juxtaposing the tone or rhetoric of a document with the context of its production (e.g., the “friendly” tone informed by the diplomatic context in Document 2 or the “angry” tone informed by European oppression in Document 9). When students remembered to discuss the additional document, they most often recognized that the perspective of “ordinary” Africans was missing and that its inclusion would provide a better understanding of African responses to European imperialism.

### ***What were common student errors or omissions?***

While the mean score and the number of students who earned a score of 7 or higher on the 2009 DBQ were all higher than those of the preceding year, the number who earned a score of 7 or higher was still lower than desired. Four major problems were apparent when examining student responses to this question:

- Core Point 3. To receive this point, students needed to provide specific evidence of African responses to European imperialism, using internal evidence from the documents. Many students used the documents as evidence of *European* actions or intent and thus did not receive any points for evidence. Many students merely listed documents in groupings or paraphrased the documents without interpreting them; in these cases students did not receive any evidence points.
- Core Point 4. Many students simply did not attempt to analyze point of view. Others confused interpretation of the document with point of view or made vague statements about bias without any form of analysis.

- Core Point 5. While only two groupings were required, many students struggled to establish coherent groupings. Many students grouped the documents chronologically, by region, or by “action and reaction,” and they received credit only if they could show a coherent and common African response reflected in all documents within the group. Many students also tried to group the documents “economically, socially, and politically” but could not articulate a coherent response for these categories.
- Core Point 6. Students often asked for another point of view or document that was potentially relevant, but they did not explain how it would enhance understanding of African responses to European imperialism. If adequately explained, missing points of view were accepted, given that the source line for Documents 2, 4, and 9 did not identify the types of documents they were.

While the point for understanding the documents could be achieved in several ways, many students misinterpreted Documents 3 and 8. Students also had some difficulty with Document 1 (they were confused by the blank lines) and Document 9 (they were not sure where to group it). Moreover, the source line for Document 5 stated the most obvious interpretation of the image, and Readers accepted this as evidence if students grouped it with other examples of resistance.

***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?***

- Move away from formulaic approaches to the DBQ that encourage students to group the documents without appropriate recourse to the question.
- Resist representing world history through a European lens, so that students are not drawn by habit to analyze Western actions and intentions at the expense of not answering the question.
- Encourage students to read and follow directions when addressing point of view.
- Allocate class time for practice in analyzing point of view so that it becomes an established habit of mind for students.
- Ensure that students recognize the need to explain the request for an additional type of document within the context of the task posed by the question.
- Make point-of-view analysis and discussion of what additional information is needed to answer questions a regular part of the course, not just an exam requirement.

## Question 2

### *What was the intent of this question?*

Students were asked to analyze the continuities and changes in patterns of interactions along the Silk Roads from 200 B.C.E. to 1450 C.E. They had five tasks: 1) to write an acceptable thesis that correctly specified both continuity and change; 2) to address both continuity and change, although not evenly or thoroughly; 3) to substantiate their thesis with appropriate historical evidence; 4) to use world historical context to effectively explain continuity and change over time; and 5) to analyze the process of continuity and change over time. Although students were not required to address “the patterns,” they did have to address interactions.

### *How well did students perform on this question?*

The mean score for this question was 2.67 out of a possible 9 points, almost exactly the same as the mean for 2008 (2.6); 4.5 percent of students earned scores of 7, 8, or 9, compared with 4 percent in 2008.

Overall, the 2009 continuity/change essays showed marked improvement over previous years. Although many students continue to struggle with writing an acceptable thesis, they are writing better. Many essays showed improved organization. Students wrote (although not always successfully) a thesis paragraph and topic sentences, used historically relevant evidence, and analyzed sources and trends. Many of the better essays had complex analytical theses. Improved sophistication contributed to essays that were multilayered and subtle.

In general, students showed improved factual knowledge of the time period. The better essays not only demonstrated breadth of knowledge but also depth, as revealed in their analysis. Using historically relevant evidence to support the thesis or the controlling idea was not a problem for many students. Many students seemed to have had little trouble with evidence, and their analysis showed improved sophistication. More students attempted and were successful at analyzing historical trends and recognizing patterns. More students effectively discussed complexities and avoided oversimplification.

### *What were common student errors or omissions?*

Many students continued to struggle with composing acceptable theses. More often than not, the thesis tended to be a variation of, “There were many changes and continuities along the Silk Roads.” Similarly, when attempting to address all parts of the question, many students had difficulty discussing both continuity and change with historically relevant specificity. For example, students addressed continuity by stating, “There were continuous technological exchanges along the Silk Roads,” but they addressed change with, “There were many changes along the Silk Roads as well.” In this case continuity is addressed with specificity but change is not.

Students also had difficulty with world historical context. The prompt asked students to use relevant world historical context to effectively explain continuities and changes over time. For this particular question, which encompassed such a large geographic area and spanned 1,650 years, world historical context included making explicit connections that explained a continuity or a change between, for example, Rome and Han or India and China:

- An unacceptable world historical context was, “Buddhism went to China through the Silk Roads,” because this statement did not describe an extraregional connection. However, “Buddhism went from India to China through the Silk Roads” was considered acceptable because it described an extraregional connection with a specific qualifier.
- Similarly, “Han China traded goods with Rome along the Silk Roads” was considered unacceptable because trade of goods along the Silk Roads is a given. However, “Han China traded *luxury goods* with Rome along the Silk Roads” was considered acceptable because “luxury goods” is a specific qualifier.

Although students were not required to address the entirety of the 1,650 years, many students opened with Han and Rome and ended with the Mongols, skipping the middle 1,000 years of the Silk Roads’ history. The lack of discussion (or perhaps knowledge) of the period from around the 200s (the end of the Han) to around the 1200s (the emergence of the Mongol Empire) presented a serious hurdle for effectively addressing both continuity and change.

Many students did not have problems with evidence, but a number of students did not have acceptable evidence for *both* continuity and change.

***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 students become more familiar with essay writing, teachers should encourage them to think and write more broadly and deeply. Some students wrote their essays based on a formula. While this may help guide students in organizing their thoughts when they are developing their essay-writing skills, formulaic organization and writing do not always translate into good essays. Responses that earned scores of 8 or 9 tended to reveal a breadth and depth of knowledge beyond the basic core scoring guidelines.

The better essays shared several common features: an analytical thesis, clear topic sentences, multiple pieces of historically relevant evidence that supported the thesis (the controlling idea), clear understanding of global processes and/or extraregional connections, and, of course, analysis of evidence throughout the essay. In other words, students who were successful not only had a strong grasp of the facts but also the ability to clearly connect various points to larger global patterns and trends.

### **Question 3**

***What was the intent of this question?***

This question asked students to compare the racial ideologies and social effects of those ideologies in two regions: North America and Latin America (including the Caribbean). The question focused on several important AP World History themes as expressed in the time period (1500–1830): racial and ethnic constructions; labor systems; state building and expansion; the interaction of cultures; migration and disease; and belief systems, philosophies, and ideologies. In fact, all of the themes

were relevant to this question. Further, the question required students to articulate a reason for the similarities or differences between the two regions (analysis).

### ***How well did students perform on this question?***

The mean score for the comparative question was 2.74, about the same as it was for the years 2005-07. (In 2008 the mean was an anomalously low 1.2.) Nearly four times as many students in 2009 earned scores of 7, 8, or 9 (5.6 percent) as they did in 2008.

Excellent student responses included a clear understanding of the difference between racial ideology and its consequences in the two regions, the ability to see variations within regions as well as between regions, ample factual evidence marshaled in defense of the student's argument, several accurate similarities and differences, and at least one attempt to explain the reason why the two regions were similar or different. Excellent essays also included a clear thesis and conclusion and usually were comparative and analytical throughout.

Most students were able to discuss the effects of racial ideology in more detail than they were the actual racial ideologies themselves, so much of the evidence was related to effects (e.g., social hierarchies or the mistreatment of native peoples and African slaves). Most students were able to provide evidence for the two regions; there was little evidence of misidentification of the regions. Students were generally able to make at least one accurate comparison between regions, and many were able to explain what caused that similarity or difference. Many students chose to address similarities in one paragraph and differences in another, or to discuss North America in one section and Latin America in another.

### ***What were common student errors or omissions?***

One of the most common errors was for students to merely repeat the language of the prompt, both in the thesis and even later in the body paragraphs. This problem was especially true for the phrase "racial ideology." In order to earn credit, students needed to explain, even if only briefly, what they believed constituted a racial ideology (a frequent and acceptable answer was, "Europeans believed they were superior").

Another error was to misunderstand what the question was asking students to discuss. Some students wrote about American imperialism in Central America and the Caribbean, others about revolutions, and others about the Columbian Exchange. Still others merely told the "story" of Spanish and English conquest of the New World without ever answering the question. Another issue was essays that wandered outside the time period, using such inappropriate examples as Manifest Destiny, the American Civil War, the American Civil Rights movement of the 1960s, the Mexican Revolution of 1910, and Social Darwinism.

While student writing has improved over the last several exams, students still often failed to write a thesis that actually addressed all parts of the tasks laid out in the question. They also frequently failed to provide analysis. Their responses either omitted this task entirely or reversed cause and effect. Others attempted analysis, but that effort did not provide an explanation of a reason for a similarity or difference between the regions.

*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?*

- Spend more time teaching students how to analyze a question in order to understand what it is asking them to do and how to organize their responses to address all parts of that question.
- Teach the vocabulary that is often used in questions—words such as “compare.” The *AP World History Course Description* provides a helpful list.
- Discourage students from constructing responses to comparison questions by discussing one region as a block and then the other region as a block, loosely linking the two blocks with a transitional sentence. That sentence often was the only comparison in a student’s response, and if it was incorrect, the student could not earn any points for comparison, analysis, or addressing the question.
- Help students improve their understanding of chronology and remind them to keep their responses focused on the period addressed by the prompt.
- Advise students how to manage their time effectively. Fewer students omitted this last question in 2009, compared to students who took the 2008 exam, so it is evident that teachers are working on this issue with students. This should continue, and students should be given practice with writing timed essays for questions they have not seen before.