



Student Performance Q&A:

2016 AP® French Language and Culture Free-Response Questions

The following comments on the 2016 free-response questions for AP® French Language and Culture were written by the Chief Reader, Pascal Ifri of Washington University in St. Louis. 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.

Task 1: E-Mail Reply

What was the intent of this question?

This task assessed writing in the interpersonal communicative mode by having students write a reply to an e-mail message. Students were allotted 15 minutes to read the message and write the reply. The response received a single, holistic score based on how well it accomplished the assigned task. Students needed to be able, first, to comprehend the e-mail, and then to write a reply using a formal form of address. The reply had to address all the questions and requests raised in the message, as well as ask for more details about something mentioned in the message.

The course theme for the e-mail reply was “*la quête de soi*,” and the task required the student to respond using formal register to two questions from an administrator in charge of allocating scholarships to foreign students interested in studying at the University of Abomey-Calvi in Benin. It is explained in the introduction of the e-mail message that the student had requested information about such a scholarship. The two questions were the following: “What would be of interest to you about studying in West Africa?” and “Which one of the fields of study mentioned [cultural or economic] interests you and why?” The student was also required to ask for more details about some point mentioned in the e-mail.

How well did students perform on this question?

The Standard Group’s mean score for Task 1, the E-mail Reply (Interpersonal Writing), was 2.91 out of a possible 5.00 points.

What were common student errors or omissions?

The most common error was caused by a lack of understanding of some crucial words such as *bourse*, *domaines cités*, *démarches*, and even *intéresse* and *animer*. In addition, some students did not know that Benin was an African country, even though *Afrique de l’ouest* was mentioned in the text of the e-mail. This

misunderstanding led them to discuss other areas of the world. Other students understood the subject of the e-mail, but ignored the fact that they were supposed to have shown interest in studying in Africa. Instead, these students responded that they did not wish to go to Africa. Many students also failed to ask for more details about something mentioned in the message, as required by the task instructions. Another common mistake came from the name *Laurent* that some students mistook for the name of a woman (even though he (Laurent) is described as the *Directeur* of the program). Other students had a difficult time manipulating the lexical field containing *intérêt*, *s'intéresser à*, *intéresser*, and *intéressant*. These words were often used inaccurately. In addition, many students used the English structure translated directly (and inaccurately) into French: *je suis intéressé dans*. There were also the usual register issues (e.g., the use of the informal *tu* instead of the formal *vous* and incorrect salutation or closing formulas) and the usual grammatical mistakes (pronouns, prepositions, verbs, *si* clauses, etc.), spelling errors, an overuse of the subjunctive in sentences that did not require it, and a lack of transitional words.

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?

- Teachers should remind students that they have to read the introduction to the e-mail carefully and to complete all the elements of the task: respond to both questions/requests expressed in the e-mail and then ask for more details about something mentioned in the message.
- Teachers should instruct students on how to write simple but correct sentences rather than encourage them to memorize formulas, such as salutations or closings. There is often a big discrepancy between the beginning, the body, and the end of the e-mail. Teachers should not spend too much time on the proper forms of openings and closings. Instead, teachers are encouraged to use formulas in real e-mails from the Internet as examples. A simple *Bien à vous* or *Bien cordialement* is enough for a culturally appropriate closing.
- Teachers should not encourage students to use ready-made sentences with idioms. In most cases, those sentences do not fit the topic.
- Teachers should ask students not to merely recycle language from the e-mail, but to answer the questions directly and to incorporate words and expressions beyond those included in the e-mail.
- Teachers should make sure that students understand how to maintain the formal register throughout their response and use appropriate vocabulary directly related to the topic.
- Teachers should have their students regularly practice this task-type and respond to e-mails covering a wide range of topics from the course themes. They should particularly focus on the use of logical connectors so that students can write more cohesive texts.
- Right before the exam, it would also be helpful for students to have a “mock” testing environment in which they are asked to complete this task within 15 minutes.
- Teachers should teach a variety of Francophone cultures and go beyond stereotypes. They could use original material from the Internet and even invite some members of those cultures to speak to their students.

Task 2: Persuasive Essay

What was the intent of this question?

This task assessed writing in the presentational communicative mode by having students write a persuasive essay on a given topic while referencing three sources of information about the topic. Students were first allotted 6 minutes to read the essay topic and the two printed sources. Then they listened to the one audio source. Afterward they had 40 minutes to write the essay. The response received a single, holistic score based on how well it accomplished the assigned task. Students needed to be able, first, to comprehend the three sources and then to present their different viewpoints. They also had to present their own viewpoint and defend it thoroughly, using information from all the sources to support the essay. As they referred to the sources, they needed to identify them appropriately. Furthermore the essay had to be organized into clear paragraphs.

The course theme for the persuasive essay task was “*la famille et la communauté*.” The student had to write a persuasive essay on the following topic: “Should senior citizens be forbidden to drive?” The first source was an article entitled, “Will senior citizens lose their driver’s license?” The article mentions a deadly accident caused by a 77-year-old man, but argues that older drivers are not more dangerous than other drivers. The article does however recommend that older drivers take some additional precautions. The second source was a chart showing the percentage of driver’s license holders according to sex and age group. The third source was a radio interview broadcast of a French prosecutor explaining that measures are taken in his district to prevent senior citizens who suffer from dementia or Alzheimer’s from driving.

How well did students perform on this question?

The Standard Group’s mean score for Task 2, the Persuasive Essay (Presentational Writing), was 2.92 out of a possible 5.00 points.

What were common student errors or omissions?

The most serious error was a failure to understand the chart and/or the audio source. As a consequence, many students provided incorrect information about those sources. Additionally, students did not integrate material from all three sources to support their argument. Furthermore, since Source #1 was the easiest to understand, many students relied on it too much or, in some cases, quoted entire passages from it. Other students just paraphrased the sources and failed to express their own opinion.

In Source #2, some students did not understand or interpret correctly the age range of *seniors* in the chart and had difficulty with the word *titulaires*.

Most students have clearly been taught how to organize a persuasive essay, but many of them did not have a sufficient knowledge base of the appropriate vocabulary and grammar to present their ideas in a satisfactory manner. As a consequence, they used neologisms or anglicisms and their essays were marred by basic grammatical errors pertaining to agreement, use of the subjunctive, verb conjugations, and pronouns. Other students used artificial expressions or structures that they were taught but that did not logically fit in their essay.

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?

- Teachers should remind students to write notes as they read/listen to the sources, organize their ideas from the sources, develop a basic outline before starting to write, and then integrate (not just summarize) all three sources into their own argument.

- Teachers should instruct students on how to write a cohesive essay: build an argument, organize their ideas, use an introduction, write in distinct paragraphs, use transitional words to connect ideas and advance an argument, and construct a solid conclusion. They should also remind students to write concisely and stay focused on the task — more is not necessarily better. Teachers should use authentic material (e.g., articles and newspaper editorials) as examples in their classrooms.
- Teachers should not ask their students to memorize stock phrases.
- Teachers should give their students the opportunity to practice developing their own points of view in writing based on authentic sources: reading selections (articles), charts and graphs (since many students seem to have difficulty interpreting them), and audio selections. All instructional materials should be in the target language.
- Teachers should make sure that their students know the basic vocabulary associated with the themes of the course and that they have mastered the necessary grammatical structures, especially the correct use of verb modes and tenses (i.e., the subjunctive with the following conjunctions: *bien que*, *à condition que*, *pour que*) and verbal constructions (i.e., “*si*” clauses). They should also familiarize students with common anglicisms and “*faux amis*.”
- Teachers should remind their students to write clearly and legibly, use quotation marks if they use material from the sources, cite the sources as per the task instructions, and leave time to reread their essays.

Task 3: Conversation

What was the intent of this question?

This task assessed speaking in the interpersonal communicative mode by having students respond as part of a simulated oral conversation. Students were first allotted 1 minute to read a preview of the conversation, including an outline of each turn in the conversation. The conversation proceeded and included 20 seconds for students to speak at each of five turns in the conversation. The series of five responses received a single, holistic score based on how well it accomplished the assigned task. The responses had to appropriately address each turn in the conversation, according to the outline and the simulated interlocutor’s utterance.

The course theme for the conversation task was “*les défis mondiaux*.” In this task the student has a conversation with Nadine, a friend, about planning a trip to a restaurant. Nadine asks the student for ideas and suggestions. The student needed to respond to the following five audio prompts:

1. Nadine calls to talk about an upcoming outing on Saturday. She asks if the student knows of a restaurant where they can all go since some people in the group are vegetarian. The student needed to respond and make a suggestion.
2. Nadine comments that she has heard good things about the restaurant, but wonders if it is too far. She asks if the restaurant is within walking distance. The student needed to respond and justify the answer.
3. Nadine comments that she would prefer to go to a restaurant that is closer and to one that serves fresh and locally produced food. The student needed to react and give their opinion.
4. Nadine mentions that the farm-to-table movement helps the environment and asks what the student does to help the environment. The student needed to respond and give details.
5. Nadine acknowledges what the student says and suggests that they meet on Saturday at 6 p.m. She asks if this is a convenient time for the student. The student needed to respond and end the conversation.

How well did students perform on this question?

The Standard Group's mean score for Task 3, the Conversation (Interpersonal Speaking), was 2.66 out of a possible 5.00 points.

What were common student errors or omissions?

The reference to the environment in prompts three and four was confusing for a number of students who did not understand the appropriateness of the reference in a conversation about restaurants. In addition, many students misunderstood some words or expressions, such as *sachant* or *ça te convient*. And a good number of students simply did not have the necessary vocabulary to express emotions, in particular, enthusiasm (too many *Je suis très excité(e)*). Moreover, as usual with this task, there were often register issues (the formal *vous* instead of the informal *tu*) and other problems pertaining to use of pronouns. Finally, as in past years, some students gave responses that were too short (less than 10 or 15 seconds, sometimes just a few words). This is commonly seen after the last 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?

- Teachers should carefully explain the process for this task type and remind students to read the instructions and the conversation outline thoroughly and to underline key words. They should also encourage students to listen to the prompts carefully, to concentrate on what is being said and to respond following the cues indicated in the outline provided.
- Teachers should refrain from asking students to use stock phrases, constructions, structures, expressions, or idioms just to impress the listener. Teachers should practice this task regularly with students to get them accustomed to giving 20 second responses. They could use older exams (even from other languages) as models. They should offer suggestions to their students on how to elaborate, in an effective manner, as much as possible (emphasizing correct verb usage and conjugations). It is highly recommended to practice with the more difficult verbs as well as with verbs followed by prepositions. Teachers should also include conversational exercises in class so that students can acquire and assimilate colloquial vocabulary and expressions.
- Teachers need to work with students on pronunciation skills. Many errors are made due to mispronunciation of vocabulary and inaccurate pronunciation of verb endings. Good pronunciation is key for success in this task. Teachers should help students pace their responses. Some issues of mispronunciation can be attributed to students trying to speak quickly and rush through their responses.
- Teachers should contact their administration and proctor to make sure that they are familiar with the recording process necessary for this task.

Task 4: Cultural Comparison

What was the intent of this question?

This task assessed speaking in the presentational communicative mode by having students make a comparative oral presentation on a cultural topic. Students were allotted 4 minutes to read the topic and prepare the presentation and then 2 minutes to deliver the presentation. The response received a single, holistic score based on how well it accomplished the assigned task. The presentation needed to compare the student's own community to an area of the French-speaking world, demonstrating understanding of cultural features of the French-speaking world. Furthermore the presentation had to be organized clearly.

The course theme for the cultural comparison task was "*les défis mondiaux*." The student had to respond to the following question: "What is the role of recycling in your community?" The student had to compare their observations of their own community to that of a Francophone country or region. The student could make reference to what they had studied, observed, and/or experienced in order to support claims presented.

How well did students perform on this question?

The Standard Group's mean score for Task 4, the Cultural Comparison (Presentational Speaking), was 3.04 out of a possible 5.00 points.

What were common student errors or omissions?

Too many students neglected to read the course theme and the presentation topic carefully enough. Other students, due to limited vocabulary about recycling, used English words (garbage, bins, landfills, etc.). In some of the presentations, students discussed general environmental issues and failed to give specific examples concerning recycling. When students addressed the topic, responses were often superficial, limited to stereotypes, or they reflected a striking lack of knowledge about the target culture (poor people in Haiti or in Africa one does not recycle). Some students did not clearly identify their community, just saying *ici* or *chez moi*, or did not identify the target community. Others discussed recycling, but in one community only, and thus did not fulfill the task which is a comparison between two cultures in two distinct communities. In some responses, students did not explicitly make a comparison but rather presented a series of facts characteristic of each culture mentioned. There were also unbalanced responses in which too much time was devoted to one of the two cultures. Finally, some students, especially those currently in a Francophone environment, did not understand that they had to compare their community to a different area of the Francophone world.

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?

- Teachers should carefully explain and practice this task type with students and emphasize the need for a comparison of two cultures. Also, teachers need to remind students to carefully read the course theme and presentation topic.
- Teachers should encourage students to make good use of the 4 minutes they have to prepare their response. Teachers should explain to the students how to use the correct register, how to organize their thoughts and how to take notes. Teachers may use topics from past exams or from other language exams and have students practice with them in class. It is also important that students digitally record themselves to become accustomed to the method that will be used during the actual exam.
- Teachers should give students various strategies leading to an effective comparison: methods for introducing transitional phrases and structures needed to compare and contrast, and means for

providing vocabulary to present one's opinion. In particular, they should make their students practice an effective presentation rather than offer a list of ideas/characteristics. However, they should refrain from teaching stock phrases or artificial formulas (especially for the introduction or the conclusion).

- Teachers should emphasize that an effective comparison requires students to equally discuss both their own community and a Francophone community, and that they must explicitly articulate the similarities and especially the differences between the two communities while maintaining focus on the topic provided.
- Teachers should introduce students to various Francophone cultures in as much depth as possible, using authentic and recent material, to ensure that students have a clear understanding of those cultures that goes beyond stereotypes and clichés. They should use online material, radio and television programs, films, newspapers, magazines, etc. They should also invite Francophone guests to speak with students, if possible.