



Student Performance Q&A:

2016 AP® Italian Language & Culture Free-Response Questions

The following comments on the 2016 free-response questions for AP® Italian Language & Culture were written by the Chief Reader, Giuseppe Cavatorta of the University of Arizona in Tucson. 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 task was *Sfide globali*. The task required the student to use the formal register to respond to an e-mail from Piero Martini, Director of Human Resources at the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO). The e-mail concerns the student's inquiry about an internship to work on the preparations for the FAO's World Food Day. The two questions the student needed to respond to were: (1) What are the reasons behind your interest in food and nutrition? and (2) What other experiences have you had that are relevant to this internship? Finally the student had to ask for further details about something mentioned in the original e-mail.

How well did students perform on this question?

The mean score for the Standard Group¹ was 3.41 out of a possible 5 points. The mean score for the Total Group was 3.60. Both the Standard Group and Total Group performance on this task were statistically the highest of all four free-response tasks.

¹ The Standard Group does not include students who hear or speak Italian at home or who have lived for one month or more in a country where Italian is the native language. Decisions about score distributions are based on the Standard Group.

What were common student errors or omissions?

- Most students maintained an exchange appropriate to the task, but many failed to seek additional details.
- Many students did not respond to one of the questions.
- Many e-mails provided elaboration (e.g., trips to other countries, especially Third-World countries where they helped with food distribution or house building); many asked the most obvious question (the dates of the internship).
- Many responses lacked accuracy and control of grammar, though they provided all the required information within the context of the task.
- A few responses demonstrated limited to almost no control of grammar — in particular, recurring problems were subject-verb agreement and adjective-noun agreement, which plagued even the best student replies.
- Many responses lacked varied vocabulary, though most contained appropriate vocabulary.
- Many responses contained spelling errors.
- Two words in particular created a problem for students: “*alimentazione*” and “*giornata*.” The first was interpreted in different ways: either as “health,” “fitness,” or “nutrition”; or as “eating disorder” or “dietary issues.” The second was mainly interpreted as “newspaper.” The word “stage” as well was in many cases misinterpreted as “a theatrical performance” or “a script about food.”
- Some students used an inappropriate register, mostly in the body and the closing of the e-mail.
- There was a noticeable lack of idiomatic language, though that did not detract from responses that were fully understandable and contained frequent elaboration. Sometimes, when idiomatic language was used, it was not appropriate for formal correspondence but consisted of obviously memorized phrases.
- The vast majority of respondents put their first and last names in their closing.

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 are already accustomed to responding to e-mails, but most of these involve interpersonal writing with friends in which the familiar register is used. This task, however, required the use of the formal register.

Teachers should do the following to help students improve their performance:

- Guide students through the task’s instructions and ensure that they know all its requirements.
- Explain the scoring guidelines for the task.
- Prepare simulated e-mail reply writing tasks for periodic practice under actual exam conditions, and score these practice responses using the scoring guidelines.
- Assist non-native speaking students who continue to struggle with formal verbs and means of address. It would be helpful perhaps to stress more strongly the formal-familiar distinction through role playing, the practice of both reading and answering business correspondence, or the creation of everyday discourse (with one’s doctor or lawyer, a store manager, or an adult stranger).
- Provide students with a list of common words used in Italy to announce events (for example, *giornata*, *fiera*, *festival*, *sagra*, *stage*, *laboratorio*, etc.).
- Employ the six course themes in the construction of these exercises.
- Keep in mind that the skills required for successful completion of an AP language exam should be cultivated from the very beginning levels of language study. In the case of the E-mail Reply, practice can begin as early as the first year of Italian through easy tasks (write to a friend, to a pen-pal; introduce yourself; ask questions; etc.), so that students’ e-mails can gradually, over the course of several years, acquire the level of complexity necessary for the AP task.

Use the five sample email tasks (from 2012, 2013, 2014, 2015, and 2016) that are available online on AP Central for the purpose of practice.

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 *Famiglia e società*, and the prompt asked the student whether working parents should leave their young children at daycare during the work day. The task presented a written text discussing how children's separation from their parents – especially from their mother – may affect them and, in fact, can be problematic for the mother herself. The task contained a table showing the percentage of children (from 0 to 2 years old) who attend day care in each Italian region. Finally, an audio text presented the point of view of a pediatrician who, after analyzing some pros and cons of daycare, stated his opinion.

How well did students perform on this question?

The mean score for the Standard Group was 2.85 out of a possible 5 points. The mean score for the Total Group was 3.12. Both the Standard Group and Total Group performance on this task were statistically lower than the other writing task, but higher compared to both speaking tasks.

What were common student errors or omissions?

Some students were not prepared to write a persuasive essay with clarity and accuracy. The following are some of the common problems experienced by students:

- Some students did not provide effective treatment within the context of the task, for example, not addressing all three sources while offering their own perspective.
- Some students did not address the specifics of the prompt and wrote about the topic in general terms.
- Some students did not demonstrate an understanding of the distinct points of view and the information contained in each of the sources, with specific references to each one.
- In source 1, practically none of the students correctly interpreted an important statement. The sentence “*ci si abbandona ad immaginare asili popolati da serene comunità di bimbi, felici di giocare insieme...*” has been interpreted as a real fact rather than an ideal situation (for example, “*I bambini chi stanno al nido sono felici di giocare insieme, per otto o nove al giorno*”).
- In source 3, there was a misunderstanding of a key point. The source mentions that “*il problema non è a chi lasciare i bambini ma dover (having to) lasciare i bambini,*” but students often understood “dover” as “dove (where to) lasciare i bambini”
- Some students did not integrate content from all three sources to support a thesis. They often cited or identified only one or two sources, with few specific details.
- Some students did not clearly and coherently present their own viewpoint together with a persuasive argument and substantive examples.

- Some students did not cite sources or elaborate on the pertinence of the evidence being marshaled in support of an argument.
- Some students used memorized stock sentences/idiomatic language — often applied out of context.
- Some students had problems with the use of transitional elements or cohesive devices.
- Some students wrote lengthy summaries of the sources without effectively using the information in support of their own viewpoint.
- There was a lack of accuracy and variety in grammar, syntax, and usage, including complex grammatical structures such as subordinate clauses and contrary-to-fact structures. There were also frequent errors in subject-verb and noun-adjective agreement.
- Many students did not develop their paragraphs using both simple and compound sentences.

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?

The presentational writing task requires a careful integration of three distinct sources of information (written text, graphic, and audio), along with the student’s expression of his or her own point of view. Responding to this task is complex and requires students to have some practice with authentic materials. The Teachers’ Resources section of the AP Central[®] site offers a large number of such materials.

Students need practice in writing essays in which they have to refer to three separate sources as well as express their own opinion on a specific subject. It is important to tell students to carefully read the prompt and remember that their essay is above all a response to a prompt and that the information in the three sources should serve to support their answer to the prompt. Students should also spend some time outlining their essay prior to writing it.

Teachers should direct students to make sure they do not only summarize or cite sources but integrate them in their essay in order to support it.

Teachers should instruct students to be more synthetic and concise in their argument and in their writing; many low scoring responses were 3–4 pages long but often lacked a coherent argument.

An emphasis on authentic materials, defined as materials produced by native speakers of Italian for native speakers of Italian, is evident in this task, which contains an authentic text, graphic, and audio text. Teachers should introduce such materials into their classrooms so that students can become familiar with them.

It would be helpful to refer students to both the student samples and the scoring guidelines posted on AP Central so that they can see actual examples of essays from the 2012–2016 exams. Teachers should discuss the sample essays with students so that they have a clear idea of how the scoring guidelines are applied.

Students need practice writing essays that reflects the actual exam conditions. They should develop a habit of giving their essays a final proofreading for common grammatical problem areas such as subject-verb agreement, noun-adjective agreement, the use of the subjunctive, spelling, the use of transitional elements, staying on task, and the use of paragraphs.

The majority of handwriting in the responses is good and clear. However, some handwriting continues to be illegible. Teachers should direct their students to write legibly because “legibility” is included in the scoring guidelines under the “Understandable” scoring bullet. Handwriting that is not understandable may contribute to a lesser score, as it will make it harder to discern the content and follow students’ reasoning.

Finally, it is important for Italian teachers to participate in Workshops and/or Summer Institutes so as to glean information about the task and then disseminate it to their students. It is imperative that students are aware of how the task works and how to complete it successfully on the day of the AP Exam.

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 *Bellezza ed estetica*. For this task students needed to respond to five audio prompts spoken by Ilaria, a classmate who would like to go to the museum with the student to see a Modigliani exhibit.

1. Ilaria asks if the student has heard about the Modigliani exhibit and if the student would like to go to it with her. The student had to accept while stating a problem.
2. Ilaria asks what the better solution for the student would be. The student had to make a suggestion.
3. Ilaria asks if they should invite someone else. The student had to respond affirmatively and offer suggestions.
4. Ilaria asks if the student would like to go out for pizza after the exhibit. The student had to make a counterproposal.
5. Ilaria agrees and asks who should call the people they agreed to invite. The student had to respond and then say goodbye to Ilaria.

How well did students perform on this question?

The mean score for the Standard Group was 2.71 out of a possible 5 points. The mean score for the Total Group was 3.07. Both the Standard Group and Total Group performance on this task were statistically higher than the other speaking task but lower than both writing tasks.

What were common student errors or omissions?

Students need to engage in activities that promote the ability to respond to dialogic situations in a natural and appropriate fashion, in line with the give-and-take of a speech event.

- Some students responded to the prompt without making any reference to the outline of the conversation.
- Some students had problems with "*sollevare un problema*" and making a "*controproposta*". Also, many students did not correctly answer the last question in the conversation ("*Chi chiama gli altri?*").
- There was a lack of comprehensibility and clarity of expression.
- Some students had difficulties understanding common expressions like "*come*" or "*come si fa*."
- Some students used elementary vocabulary instead of varied and rich vocabulary and idiomatic language.
- There was a lack of accuracy and variety in grammar, syntax, and usage, including errors of agreement (subject-verb, noun-adjective), misuse of articles, lack of subordinate clauses, and errors in word order.

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?

The following suggestions would be useful for teachers to implement in order to familiarize students with this task:

- Students should be aware that they sometimes need to produce more than one language function in response to an audio prompt.
- Students should be aware that they may be asked to suggest an alternative or pose a problem.
- Although students speak in class, they may not have practice in sustained dialogues, as this task requires. It would be useful to familiarize students with various types of speech interactions (greetings, responses to questions, queries for information, making a counter proposal, providing details in response to increasingly complex prompts, etc.).
- Students should read and listen very carefully to the instructions concerning how to respond to the task, making connections between what they hear and what is written in the directions for the conversation.
- It is important that students practice this part of the exam with the equipment that will be used during the actual administration. Students should have practice responding to a series of five prompts, including ones that require them to initiate an exchange, such as by asking a question.
- Students need to develop a sense of how to respond in 20 seconds. This sort of practice needs to occur throughout the academic year.
- Students need to listen carefully to the prompt and say something relevant in response, even if what they say is brief.
- Students need to practice listening to a wide variety of male and female voices. Appropriate audio clips from various media would be useful for students both in and outside of the classroom. Many of these materials are easily accessible on the Internet, and AP Central has a list of links to audio materials.
- The speaking component in the classroom should not be solely focused on the conversation task. Rather, a variety of activities should be introduced into the curriculum, such as interviews and debates. Students need to be prepared to respond spontaneously to different situations. This will also improve fluency and confidence in their own linguistic abilities. At the same time, instructors need to pay attention to teaching verb tenses, increasing vocabulary, and so forth. Successful self-correction of an error is always viewed favorably.

It is vital that student responses are recorded properly. To ensure that this happens, teachers should take the following steps:

- Prior to the exam, work with school authorities and the proctor to ensure that there will be no distracting noises while students are recording.
- Since it is important to ensure that the proctor knows how to administer the speaking section of the exam, review the relevant guidelines with the proctor well in advance of the administration.
- Remind students not to stop and start their machines while recording. Students should follow directions and start, pause, or stop the recording only when told to do so; they should not pause or stop the recording between individual questions.
- Prior to the exam, take students to the room and familiarize them with the equipment.

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 Italian-speaking world, demonstrating understanding of cultural features of the Italian-speaking world. Furthermore the presentation had to be organized clearly.

The course theme for the cultural comparison task was *Vita contemporanea*. The task consisted of a question that asked students what kinds of events or activities their community engages in for recreation or during free time. In their oral presentation, students had to treat the topic within the context of the task: they had to make a comparison between their own community and an Italian community with which they were familiar.

How well did students perform on this question?

The mean score for the Standard Group was 2.55 out of a possible 5 points. The mean score for the Total Group was 2.76. Both the Standard Group and Total Group performance on this task were statistically the lowest of all four free-response tasks.

What were common student errors or omissions?

Common errors or omissions included the following:

- A few students did not address the topic and often made a general and generic comparison between Italy and their own country.
- Some students talked in general terms with no reference to any culture/community.
- Some students did not demonstrate a complete understanding of the Italian context to which they were comparing their own culture.
- Some students did not provide an organized presentation with a clear and orderly comparison of the two communities.
- A few students are still attracted by the “*Tema del corso*” and tend to focus on it, instead of developing the “*Argomento della relazione*.” In their presentation, some students in fact talked about the course theme *Vita contemporanea* instead of the prompt “*Quali tipi di eventi attività sono visti come momenti di relax e tempo libero...*” Students should be trained to read the instructions through to the end.
- Some students did not provide an accurate response containing variety in grammar and syntax; frequent grammatical and syntactic errors made comprehension difficult.
- Some students' lack of correct pronunciation, intonation, and pacing impeded comprehension.

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 remember that they must address all aspects of this task by making clear comparisons between their community and a community belonging to the target culture, as well as include accurate and appropriate examples.
- Linguistic aspects are important (pronunciation, intonation, pacing, register, grammar, syntax, usage, lexicon, and idiomatic expressions). Due to the anxiety and pressure that students may experience during the exam, it could be difficult for them to manage their time. Thus teachers could suggest that students start their presentation by developing the topic within Italian culture first and, if they run out of time, later employ rhetorical strategies that might help establish the comparison

with their own country/community. Because this is the only part of the exam where students are asked to demonstrate their knowledge of Italian culture, a comparison that focuses on details about the target culture generally receives a better score than a comparison that focuses on details about the student's community.

- Because Task 4 is a presentation, good organization is invaluable. A good organization makes the message more understandable.
- Teachers should also train their students to optimize the time they have (4 minutes) for carefully reading the prompt (the “*Argomento della relazione*” and not the “*Tema del corso*”) and preparing their presentation. Writing down key words or important aspects they want to touch on will provide them with an outline for their presentations. This will help them to logically organize their speech, maintain the thread of their thoughts, and might rescue them during their presentations, when the level of pressure and stress is higher.
- AP students are not required to discuss the cultural topic abstractly. Nevertheless, they are expected to be able to go beyond “products” and “practices” and relate these two aspects to socio-cultural “perspectives.” Only by reflecting on perspectives will students be able to acquire a deeper understanding of both their own culture and the target language culture and to avoid stereotypes. In this regard, it is important that the presentation and discussion of cultural information in class is done almost exclusively in Italian.
- Sometimes it seems that students have good ideas but are not able to develop them fully because their vocabulary is basic. As stated above, the almost exclusive use of Italian in class should be adopted from level I on, so that students can gradually build their vocabulary.
- Pay attention to grammar and syntax. Even if AP Italian readers are clearly instructed not to focus on single errors, it does not help the students' performance when they say “*sappo*” instead of “*so*” or “*ando*” instead of “*vado*”; when they use the wrong auxiliary verb in the *passato prossimo* with very common verbs; or when they do not conjugate verbs and instead use the infinitive mode.

Teachers should be attentive also to the following points:

- Instruct students to read and follow the directions very carefully.
- Provide models of comparisons between one's home community and the target culture. These might include food, cities, transportation, and so forth.
- Provide actual timed testing situations based on exemplary test questions. The responses should be recorded, and those replies should be scored in accordance with the scoring guidelines.
- Help students become familiar with the equipment to be used during the administration of the actual exam.
- Expose students to as many authentic materials as possible. Devise out-of-class activities that involve exposure to authentic textual and audio materials.

In general, for all the questions on the exam, the most important suggestion for improving students' performance is to offer constant practice during AP courses by providing examples from previous exams. The AP should be the final step of a well-built curriculum that integrates the interpersonal, presentational, and interpretive modes within a cultural context. These are all necessary skills that should be gradually developed in a well-articulated curriculum, with the AP course and exam being the culmination of the study of a language.