



Student Performance Q&A:

2016 AP® World History Free-Response Questions

The following comments on the 2016 free-response questions for AP® World History were written by the Chief Reader, Tim Keirn of the California State University, Long Beach. 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?

This question asked students to use the documents to analyze the relationships between gender and politics in twentieth-century Latin America. The question addressed Key Concept 6.3. of the AP World History Curriculum Framework (New Conceptualizations of Global Economy, Society, and Culture), specifically Section 6.3. III (People conceptualized society and culture in new ways: rights-based discourses challenged old assumptions about race, class, gender, and religion. In much of the world access to educations as well as participation in new political and professional roles, became more inclusive in terms of race, class, and gender). The 10 documents provided students with multiple opportunities to examine the intersection of the cultural concept of gender and the practice of politics in Latin America. The documents addressed themes such as the predominantly patriarchal nature of Latin American societies; the cultural expectations of politics as part of the male-dominated public sphere; the unfolding of debates over the question of women's suffrage; the efforts of women to undertake direct political action in order to assert their rights or challenge cultural norms; and the impact of global ideologies such as socialism, communism, and feminism on the role of women in Latin American politics. As part of their responses, students also had to group the documents in at least three ways as well as analyze the authorial point of view of at least two documents of their choice. The selection of documents in the question provided students with multiple opportunities to earn the points for grouping and point-of-view analysis.

How well did students perform on this question?

The mean score on this question was 2.96 points out of a possible 9 points.

Generally, students performed well on this question. Most students understood the prompt and the basic meaning of the documents in the question and wrote lengthy responses with some analysis of the documents. Many responses were also able to connect the content of the documents to a broader argument about the role of Latin American women in politics and to organize the documents in several distinct groups.

Nearly all students attempted to answer the question and many wrote longer, better-developed essays with more document analysis than in previous years. There appeared to be far more requests for additional documents, and these requests were often accompanied by better explanations as to why the requested documents would be useful.

What were common student errors or omissions?

In general, the responses suggest that almost all students took the phrase “relationship between gender and politics” in the question prompt to refer to the role of women in politics. This interpretation of the question is understandable given the selection of documents in the question and those students who adopted it were not penalized in scoring. Only a few responses, usually toward the upper end of the score range, offered any discussion of men as gendered persons.

Core Point 1 (Thesis): Many responses provided the two relationships between gender and politics needed to earn this point. Many minimally acceptable theses consisted of little more than stating in the introductory paragraph the document groupings that the essay set out to develop, for example by identifying the opposing groups on the question of suffrage for women or women’s rights in general. Such statements were often enough to earn the point for thesis, though they could not be used to earn other points in the rubric simultaneously.

Core Point 2 (Understanding the basic meaning of the documents): Most responses addressed all 10 documents. Students were allowed to use the photograph in Document 3 as evidence of women fighting during the Mexican Revolution. Similarly, students were allowed to argue that the author of Document 4 was actively promoting women’s rights (as opposed to advocating giving women rights to prevent women from turning to socialism). Students had greater difficulty with the documents that showed women participating in political activities that do not relate directly to women’s rights. For example, many students misread Document 5 to be an attempt by the author to call upon women to reject the male-dominated government rather than recognizing it as an example of a woman taking a leadership position in a mixed gender activist group. Similarly, many students asserted that the Madres de la Plaza de Mayo (Document 8) were protesting because their children and family members had been punished for the authorities because of their promotion of women’s rights — in other words, many students used the document to speculate on the political activities of the family members rather than to comment on the political activism of the mothers. Finally, the rhetorical questions in Document 10 threw off many students who did not understand the device and misinterpreted the document to mean that the speaker was arguing that women should give up their losing battle in pursuit of political equality to return to their traditional domestic duties.

Core Points 3 and 4 (Supporting the thesis with evidence from the documents): Students who understood the basic meaning of the documents were usually able to identify connections between women and politics outlined in all or all but one of the documents and use those connections in support of their theses without much difficulty. Some responses offered as evidence only direct quotations from the document with minimal or no commentary; such responses did not earn the evidence points. To earn the points students must interpret the documents with added description, explanation, and analysis since the documents do not speak for themselves.

Core Point 5 (Analysis of point of view in at least two documents): Though generally speaking more students attempted analysis of point of view of the documents than in the past, this core point remains a significant challenge for many students. The successful examples of point-of-view analysis were typically found in responses that recognized that a number of documents were intended to persuade or convince. Many unsuccessful attempts amounted to mere descriptions of the content of the document without offering a connection between the content and the motivation of the author. Other unsuccessful attempts used the attribution lines provided with the documents to make vague statements about authorial bias or unsubstantiated assumptions about the reliability of a document. Such statements were often offered without explaining the significance of these claims to the student’s analysis of the document or overall

argument. Finally, many students did little more than to recognize that the author or speaker in a document was a man or a woman, which did not earn points for analysis of point of view.

Core Point 6 (Grouping the documents in three ways): in order to form a group, students needed to link at least two documents to explain a relationship between gender and politics. These groups could be based on a number of commonalities between documents — country of origin, gender of the author, type of political involvement, etc. — as long as that underlying commonality was linked in some way to gender and politics. Many of the documents could also be used to create pairs of opposing or contrasting viewpoints, which could also be credited as a valid grouping. In order to earn the point, students had to make three document groupings. Responses that merely listed document numbers under a common rubric or responses that offered groupings without connection to gender and politics did not earn credit toward the core point.

Core Point 7 (Requesting an additional document): In general many more students attempted the additional document request than has been the case in the past. The attempts that were unsuccessful typically did not earn the point because they failed to explain why the document, source, or type of historical voice being requested would be useful in extending their analysis of the relationship between gender and politics. One common mistake along these lines was to make a request for an additional document and state only that such a document would be interesting. Another common mistake was describing (often at considerable length) the hypothetical contents of the document being requested but failing to explain how such a document would contribute to an analysis of the relationship between gender and politics. Finally, some responses that attempted the additional document request did not earn the point because the document, source, or historical voice they requested was already represented in the documents.

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?

This Document-Based Question should provide a good transition point between the “legacy” DBQ format and the redesigned DBQ format that is being launched in 2017. There is much in the question that lends itself to adaptation and practice for the new exam format. In particular, the documents provide good material for practicing document “sourcing” (analysis of point-of-view, purpose, audience, and historical context), which would be an integral part of the new DBQ rubric. In addition, even though document groupings would no longer be required in the new DBQ, there are strong teachable relationships between the skill of grouping documents and the Argument Development rubric point in the new-style DBQ. Teachers’ highlighting of these relationships should provide students with valuable strategies for earning points under the new DBQ rubric. Specifically, there were a number of ways to group the documents in this year’s DBQ that teachers might find useful for teaching the three pathways (corroboration, contradiction, and qualification) to earning the Argument Development point in the new DBQ rubric. Finally, this year’s DBQ offers teachers multiple ways to approach the Synthesis point in the new rubric, as the topic of gender and politics in modern Latin America offers multiple obvious points of connection to other periods and other geographical settings (for example, comparing the political participation of Latin American women to the political participation of women in other parts of the world). There are also numerous ways to use the documents in this year’s DBQ to train students to integrate the politics of gender history with other thematic categories (for example, economic systems and social hierarchies) thereby opening further pathways to earning the Synthesis point in the new DBQ rubric.

Question 2

What was the intent of this question?

This question asked students to analyze economic continuities and changes in trade networks within Afro-Eurasia in the period circa 600 C.E. to 1450 C.E. This content is part of Key Concept 3.1. of the AP World History Curriculum Framework, Expansion and Intensification of Communication and Exchange Networks. The geographic focus of the question was on the entirety of Afro-Eurasia, giving students broad scope to use examples drawn from various states and localities, such as the Sudanic empires, Islamic caliphates, Byzantine and other Roman successor states, South Asian principalities, several major Chinese dynasties, etc. The concept of the continuity-and-change-over-time question type is to require students to trace historical developments related to a particular topic through time, explaining reasons for continuity and change, and placing the continuities and changes in a broader world context. For this particular question, the intent of the wording was to narrow the focus to economic continuities and changes and to de-emphasize social, political, cultural, and environmental themes, in favor of the economic theme. In practice that meant that the focus of the question was on trade itself and on features of the trade networks that were directly linked to the economics of trade — for example, the types of goods and services exchanged, the geographic extent of the networks, and the organizational, logistical, infrastructural, or financial aspects of the trade carried along the networks. However, at the upper end of the score scale, some discussion of social, political, or other factors that influenced the process of trade route expansion and contraction was expected for essays to earn the point for analyzing the causes of continuity and change.

How well did students perform on this question?

The mean score on this question was 1.93 points out of a possible 9 points.

The thesis point required clear identification of both an *economic* continuity and an *economic* change, which students seemed to find moderately difficult. Assuming they were able to keep an economic focus, most students had the knowledge and skills to earn the thesis point. A majority of responses demonstrated good organization, following the thesis or attempted thesis with body paragraphs in support of the argument. Most students who could effectively restate their categories of argument as topic sentences about economic change and economic continuity were able to earn the points for addressing all parts of the question.

Students generally presented a good amount of historical information related to the prompt, which resulted in many essays scoring 2 evidence points. Many students seem to have a good grasp of postclassical-era trade networks in terms of their geography, the peoples and the trade goods involved, and the major aspects of the cultural diffusion that occurred along these networks.

One of the more difficult requirements of the scoring guide for students to meet was the “world historical context” point. Even essays which exhibited mastery of postclassical Afro-Eurasian trade networks frequently lacked more than a cursory reference to larger patterns, processes, or a broader time frame. The most successful essays in this area were often those which traced causes of economic continuity or change back into classical-period events, or those which carried the effects forward into the early-modern period and examined the results of these postclassical economic trends.

The responses indicated that students in general seem to have found analysis of change easier than analysis of continuity. Many responses were successful in explaining the contributing causes for a number of economic changes in the period, for example, new business and financial practices, new consumer demand patterns, or changing production techniques for goods and services. In order to score the points for analysis, however, responses had to analyze a continuity as well as a change. In practice, that requirement was often the difference between the middling-good essays and the best ones. The best essays repeatedly followed their descriptions of factual evidence with explanation and analysis tying those facts to the argument and clarifying why and how they existed in that time and place.

What were common student errors or omissions?

Many students neglected the economic requirement in creating a thesis, so that the resulting continuity and change discussion was not scorable even if otherwise accurate. The most common other error in both the thesis and topic sentences was vagueness, as many students merely mentioned a category in which change occurred rather than specifically identifying a change. For instance, “trade networks stayed the same in destinations connected and goods transported” scores 0 points, but “trade networks continued to link the Middle East with East Asia for the exchange of luxury items such as silk” scores 1 point for addressing a continuity.

Lack of specific detail was common among the lower-scoring essays. Mid-range essays generally exhibited significant detail regarding trade networks, but sometimes neglected to link that detail effectively to economics and instead discussed state-building or cultural exchanges. Many essays listed facts rather than deploying them in support of the thesis.

World historical context was often poorly integrated or entirely omitted from low- and mid-range essays. Students should be reminded that effective historical writing entails linking the specific topic of the question to the broader geographic and chronological context in which the question is set.

Attempts at analysis were typically absent among the lower-scoring essays, and lacking even among some of the mid-range essays. Even essays that precisely characterized continuity and change and presented accurate evidence in support of their argument often did not extend the argument by offering an analysis of the reasons or causes for the identified continuities and changes. The analysis point continues to be a significant obstacle for many essays to progress into the Expanded Core.

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?

There are numerous ways for teachers to use this question as a way to prepare their students for success on the redesigned exam in 2017. The difficulty students had staying on-task given the focus of the question on economic developments highlights the need for teachers to offer their students repeated practice in analyzing essay prompts. Students will be held even more strongly to account in the redesigned exam for building a coherent argument that answers all parts of the question. Teachers will also be well served to focus students on the deployment of the Historical Thinking Skill of analyzing Continuity and Change, specifically on the need to integrate analysis and explanation into their discussion. The new Long-Answer Question rubrics that will be launched in 2017 place an even greater emphasis on the student’s ability to link evidence analytically into an overall historical argument that is both content-rich and skill-driven.

The “world historical context” core point in the legacy CCOT rubric provides a unique point of continuity with the redesigned exam that will launch in 2017. Teachers are strongly encouraged to train their students in the habit of nestling their responses within a broader conceptualization of world history. An ability to reach beyond the immediate geographic and chronological focus of a question to larger points of comparison or analogy will serve students well earning both the “Contextualization” and the “Synthesis” points of the redesigned free-response question rubrics.

Question 3

What was the intent of this question?

This question asked students to analyze similarities and differences in the causes of two (out of a choice of three) Atlantic World eighteenth-century revolutions. This content is part of Key Concept 5.3. of the AP World History Curriculum Framework (Nationalism, Revolution, and Reform). By focusing on the historical thinking skill of Causation, the question required students to take an analytical approach and compare the factors that led to the outbreak of the chosen revolutions, rather than merely describe and juxtapose events and/or individuals that were part of the course of the chosen revolutions. By including the American Revolution as one of the three options, the question gave most students the chance to discuss as part of their answers content with which many felt relatively comfortable. One result of this was that the other two options in the comparison (the Haitian and/or French Revolution) became, in effect the “high bar” and provided opportunities for additional differentiation among student responses.

How well did students perform on this question?

The mean score on this question was 1.92 points out of a possible 9 points.

Overall, the familiarity of the content (especially in regard to the American Revolution and, to a lesser degree the French Revolution) gave students the confidence to attempt to answer the question. Students struggled, however, with the specific requirement in the prompt to analyze similarities and differences in the *causes* of two revolutions.

Success in earning the thesis point depended heavily on the students’ understanding of the prompt. Students who addressed causation were often successful in earning the thesis point, frequently referencing Enlightenment ideas as a similarity. Causes of difference tended to be a point of struggle throughout the essay, with many students focusing on post-revolution governmental differences, or differences in the groups who chose to rebel, rather than differences in the causes of the chosen revolutions.

Student responses demonstrated a considerable amount of specific knowledge about the course of the three revolutions, although specific knowledge of the Haitian Revolution tended to be a bit more sporadic and showed less depth than knowledge of the other two revolutions. Because the scoring guideline for the question allowed students to earn the points for substantiating the thesis with evidence *without* requiring that the evidence be about causes or causal in nature, many students were able to earn these points. Teachers should be applauded for the specific knowledge students demonstrated throughout their essays.

The core points for direct comparison and analysis proved difficult for most students, especially in conjunction with the requirement that the comparison be about causes of the revolutions. Many responses attempted to compare revolutions by focusing on who was rebelling against whom, how the revolutions unfolded, or what the outcomes of the revolutions were, rather than addressing similarities and differences in the causes of the chosen revolutions. Even responses that stayed focused on causes were sometimes hampered by the insufficient number of comparisons they offered. Although students demonstrated some improvement in providing direct comparisons of *both* similarities and differences, they often confined themselves to discussing *one* similarity and *one* difference only. Doing so was generally sufficient to earn 2 points for addressing all parts of the question, but not enough to earn the point for additional direct comparison. Analysis also continued to be a difficult concept for students to grasp, with many responses, even among those firmly focused on causes, offering narrative rather than analytical discussions of the similarities and differences among the two chosen historical settings. Many attempts at analysis were therefore unsuccessful, as they tended to focus on *how* the circumstances that led to the chosen revolutions were similar or different, rather than on *why* they were similar or different.

What were common student errors or omissions?

The most common student error was misreading of the question (missing the emphasis on causation), thereby failing to earn the thesis point and likely jeopardizing one’s chances of earning the points for addressing all parts of the question and the point for additional direct comparison. A second common error was lack of ability to identify and analyze causes for a *difference* between the two chosen revolutions. A third common error was either not attempting the analysis point or attempting it but being unsuccessful because of a lack of focus on explaining why the comparison of causes holds for the two chosen locations (as opposed to describing how the contexts in the two chosen locations were similar or different). Key words to indicate the student’s intention to introduce analysis (e.g., “because”) continue to be frequently missing from the essays.

Even though the Comparative question rubric has been unchanged for a number of years, many students continue to struggle with the number of comparisons (three) that are required to earn all core points. The rubric calls for three comparisons — a similarity, a difference, and one additional comparison (the “direct comparison.”) — but, as in previous years, many students struggled with developing a third comparison.

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?

With the launch of the new exam format in 2017, teaching students to read free-response prompts closely and identifying the core tasks of questions carefully before they begin writing their answers will be increasingly important given the new rubric’s focus on deploying the Historical Thinking Skills and answering all parts of the question. Teachers could use this year’s comparative question, especially its focus on causes of revolutions to demonstrate to their students the necessity of close and careful reading of the prompt and planning an answer. With the Historical Thinking Skill of Comparison remaining an important component of the redesigned exam, the ability not only to describe similarities and differences between historical events but also to analyze the causes for these similarities and differences will continue to be a critical skill for students to develop. Continued practice in analyzing why historical processes in different geographic and chronological contexts develop in similar or different ways will also be very useful in preparing students for success in earning the points for Contextualization and Synthesis in the new exam format free-response rubrics. Finally, as teachers prepare for the new exam, encouraging students to fully substantiate their arguments with plentiful and accurate historical evidence will become increasingly important.