



Student Performance Q&A: 2014 AP[®] Psychology Free-Response Questions

The following comments on the 2014 free-response questions for AP[®] Psychology were provided by Question 1 and 2 question leaders in charge of rubric development and edited and approved by the Chief Reader, Elizabeth Yost Hammer, Ph.D., Xavier University of Louisiana, New Orleans. 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 assessed students' ability to analyze characteristics of research design and their ability to create and correctly label a visual representation of research results.

Students were required to describe the levels of the independent variable, as described in the question. The question also assessed the students' understanding of how researchers measure a dependent variable. It was also necessary for students to create a bar graph, including the labeling of each axis, illustrating the results of the study. Students had to explain why researchers can draw cause and effect conclusions between the independent and dependent variables. The question also assessed how well students comprehend statistical significance within the context of a specific study and why debriefing is necessary in research studies that include deception.

How well did students perform on this question?

On Question 1, the mean score was 3.42 out of a possible 7 points.

What were common student errors or omissions?

A common student error was failing to explain statistical significance in the context of the study. Many students confused statistical significance with correlational research. Some students discussed $p < .05$, but without further explanation as to what this means, students did not score this point. Students also had difficulty in explaining why researchers can conclude that there is a cause-and-effect relationship between the independent and dependent variables. The most common error was to relate the results of the research instead of discussing that participants were randomly assigned to the different conditions, that the described study was an experiment, or that the independent variable was manipulated.

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 emphasize that students should read the question carefully and be certain they understand what the question is asking them to do, underlining key words and concepts, before they begin to write their response. A very brief pre-writing period that gives students time to think through the question and plan their response would help them write more concisely and accurately. Teachers should also emphasize that students be as specific in their responses as possible. Students should practice writing timed, AP[®] Psychology-style questions throughout the school year. Teachers would benefit from grading student responses using a rubric so that their students are used to how their free-response questions will be scored on the AP[®] Psychology exam.

Question 2

What was the intent of this question?

The intent of the first part of the question was to assess understanding of formative early life experiences: authoritarian parenting style, identity versus role confusion, and unconditional positive regard. Students should describe these terms as well as identify how the concepts might make success in a specific aspect of college more or less likely. The intent of the second segment of the question was to assess understanding of ways to increase success in the future using descriptions of key psychological concepts: divergent thinking, elaborative rehearsal, intrinsic motivation, and self-efficacy. For the second part, students should also address a specific increase in success related to each term.

How well did students perform on this question?

On Question 2, the mean score was 2.53 out of a possible 7 points.

What were common student errors or omissions?

Students often failed to offer specific outcomes with a clear direction of effect. In the first part of the question, a clear outcome related to college must have been explained to show either a reasonable increase or decrease in success. In the second part of the question, a clear outcome to show a reasonable increase in success often was lacking.

For unconditional positive regard, students sometimes offered constant praise as an explanation of the term, which is incorrect.

For divergent thinking, students often wrote that thinking in different ways could be used to learn new approaches. Because new approaches are not inherently positive or negative, an increase in success could not be inferred, and the point did not score.

For elaborative rehearsal, students often discussed non-elaborative strategies such as repetition.

For self-efficacy, students often explained the term as general confidence rather than confidence in a specific ability, as would be required for self-efficacy.

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 should make sure they read the question carefully. For example, when a question asks for an example of an increase in success, students should not simply restate that the outcome is an increase in success, with no specific example given.