



## Student Performance Q and A: 2014 AP<sup>®</sup> United States History Free-Response Questions

The following comments on the 2014 free-response questions for AP<sup>®</sup> United States History were written by the Chief Reader, Jonathan Chu of the University of Massachusetts, Boston. 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 was to allow students to examine how and why United States foreign policy changed between 1918 and 1953. The question tested the ability of students to understand change over time and the factors that caused that change. Students had to support their analysis with inferences gained from the documents, as well as specific information not included in the documents.

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

The mean score on the DBQ was 3.34 out of a possible 9 points.

Because the question was a mainstream question requiring information that students had learned relatively recently, they performed relatively well on this question compared to other years. Most students knew something about the question and could fashion a reasonable response to it. None of the documents seemed to pose major problems for student understanding, and the vast majority of students recognized the major change over time from isolationism to internationalism.

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

Because of the breadth of the question, many students had time period gaps in their essays. Most commonly, there was little discussion of the interwar time period from 1922 to 1935. Many students confused chronological sequencing. Some students misread the question and believed they were supposed to compare United States foreign policy in 1918 with United States foreign policy in 1953. As a result they failed, in many instances, to deal with the why portion of the question. Some students tried to impose political, economic, and social categories on the question with minimal success. Students still have a tendency to use too many long direct quotes from the documents, which interrupts the flow of the essay. Many essays spend too much time on the introduction, sometimes as much as a page, which cuts into the time they have to present their argument.

*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?*

1. Cut down on the length of introductory paragraphs. The first thing a reader is looking for is a solid thesis statement. Give it to them early in the essay.
2. Avoid long direct quotes from the documents. They interfere with the flow of the essay.
3. Employ strategies that help student focus on correct chronological sequencing.
4. Encourage students to look for logical organizational categories in the question rather than attempt to impose political, economic, and social categories where they don't apply.

## **Question 2**

*What was the intent of this question?*

The intent was for students to examine how two movements impacted colonial North American development between 1620 and 1776.

*How well did students perform on this question?*

The mean score on Question 2 was 3.01 out of a possible 9 points.

Students performed relatively well on this essay, considering that textbooks rarely offer more than two pages on the Enlightenment and the First Great Awakening. In contrast, students receive repeated instruction and textbook support on Puritanism from 1620 and generally responded more effectively on that topic.

*What were common student errors or omissions?*

Common omissions included predestination, individuals and the colonies they were responsible for settling, Deism, rationalism, the evolution of colonial governments, an overall understanding of Protestantism, and the unity that developed between 1620 and 1776. Errors involved misunderstandings of the Halfway Covenant, confusing the Great Awakening with the Enlightenment, identifying the Second Great Awakening as the First Great Awakening, conflating literary portrayals of Puritanism with historical fact, and identifying Quakers or Catholics as Puritans.

*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 think broadly about the colonial period and their discussions should reflect this by contextualizing topics and relating them through periodization to illuminate connections and impact. Offering students instruction on religious, political, intellectual, economic, and philosophical themes allows them to develop a more comprehensive perspective from which to approach historical topics.

### Question 3

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

The question asked students to compare and contrast the Jacksonian Democratic Party and the Whig Party of the 1830s and 1840s, focusing on two of the following: social reform, the role of the federal government in the economy, or westward expansion. It required students to use relevant historical information to support their arguments. The question tested the primary historical thinking skill of comparison, and the stronger essays focused on the secondary skills of understanding continuity and change over time, contextualization, and using relevant historical evidence.

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

The mean score on Question 3 was 2.76 out of a possible 9 points.

Only about one-fifth of the test-takers chose to answer this question, even though it was a mainstream question that allowed students to demonstrate their knowledge of the principal political parties of the second party system and their views about two of three important issues of the day: social reform, the role of the federal government in the economy, and westward expansion. Those students who chose to answer the question and understood the intent of the question did fairly well.

Students who wrote the stronger essays saw this question as one about how the views of two political parties in the 1830s and 1840s were similar and different, not how President Andrew Jackson transformed America. They tended to link political party constituencies to the relevant historical information; saw differing views within each party, often based on geographical differences; and were driven by issues rather than by Jackson. These strong essays exhibited a good understanding of chronology, contained a fair amount of analysis based on reasons for the similarities and differences, and contained relevant historical information that supported their arguments. Examples include: the Whigs favored the Second Bank of the United States, were concerned about the extension of slavery and slave power into the west, and embraced reforms and ideas inspired by the Second Great Awakening; the Jacksonian Democrats opposed the rechartering of the Second Bank of the United States because it was a monopoly that favored the North at the expense of the South and West, favored westward expansion (partly to expand cotton plantations and slavery into the West), and were more in favor of expansion of voting rights for white males without property.

What separated the high-scoring essays from the lower-scoring essays was the students' use of analysis. Many essays had unfocused or only partially developed thesis statements that addressed the time period very generally, provided too much biographical information about Andrew Jackson, or forgot about the Whigs.

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

1. Many essays focused almost entirely on the political parties in the 1830s and neglected the 1840s.
2. Students used the terms regulate and stimulate interchangeably, although these terms have different meanings.
3. Essays often had an abundance of information about Jacksonian Democrats and lesser amounts about the Whigs. Whigs were often referenced through the sentence, "The Whigs believed the opposite."
4. There was a tendency in some essays to conflate economics and politics or just address politics, even though none of the categories focused solely on politics.
5. Students failed to address westward expansion in the 1840s, choosing instead to focus on American Indian removal in the 1830s without placing American Indian removal in the context of westward expansion.

*Based on your experience of student responses at the AP<sup>®</sup> Reading, what message would you like to send to teachers that might help them to improve the performance of their students on the exam?*

1. Teachers are doing a good job of instructing students how to use the skill of comparison because even those students who wrote poor quality essays compared and contrasted. However, with the redesigned course beginning in 2014–2015, teachers need to focus on the other eight historical thinking skills as well, especially the skill of contextualization.
2. Remind students of the importance of chronological reasoning as a tool for understanding U. S. history, and instruct them to write about the entire time period identified in a question whenever possible. While information about the role of the government in the economy centered on the 1830s, westward expansion and reform movements could have centered on both decades: 1830s — the Texas War for Independence from Mexico; 1840s — the widespread belief in manifest destiny, the annexation of Texas, and the Mexican-American War; 1830s and 1840s — reforms and ideas inspired by the Second Great Awakening such as temperance, prison reform, sabbatarianism, millennialism, utopianism, abolition, moral reform, reform of the pauper system, women’s rights, the peace movement, reform of public education, and the elimination of purportedly sinful activities.
3. Teach students how to read and scrutinize an essay question, address all parts of the question, and then analyze by linking historical information from the time period of the question to what the question is asking them to do. Analysis should be integrated throughout the essay, not limited to the thesis or the conclusion, or both. In addition, work with students and teach them what it means to not only write a thesis, but also to fully develop the thesis within the essay.

#### **Question 4**

*What was the intent of this question?*

The question asked students to analyze the extent to which the goals of Reconstruction (1865–1877) regarding African Americans were achieved by 1900. In order to successfully answer this question, students needed to identify and address the goals of Reconstruction regarding African Americans and then explain the extent to which those goals were achieved by 1900.

*How well did students perform on this question?*

The mean score on Question 4 was 3.10 out of a possible 9 points.

Because 87 percent of the students chose this question, answers varied widely. Stronger papers clearly identified the goals in the introductory paragraph and then discussed the extent to which those goals were achieved. Others discussed the goals in a more embedded fashion.

Most students provided a quick overview of Reconstruction and then moved to a discussion of the Civil War and Reconstruction constitutional amendments and how, once Congressional Reconstruction ended, those amendments were limited in their implementation because of the actions of local and state governments in the South.

Other students organized their discussion around social, political, and economic goals for African Americans and then discussed the limitations in each area.

Common information included: Civil War and Reconstruction amendments, Freedmen’s Bureau, sharecropping, tenant farming, Black Codes, Jim Crow Laws, poll taxes, literacy tests, grandfather clause, Ku Klux Klan, Compromise of 1877, lynching, and *Plessy v. Ferguson*.

*What were common student errors or omissions?*

1. A common difficulty was covering the entire time period indicated in the question. Many students could freely discuss events related to Reconstruction and the goals for African Americans, but they had difficulty moving their discussion beyond 1877 and up to the turn of the century.
2. Many students also had difficulty with analysis. Students could describe the goals of Reconstruction, but they were limited in their ability to analyze the extent to which the goals of Reconstruction for African Americans were achieved.
3. Students experienced some confusion regarding the chronology of events related to Reconstruction (i.e., using Black Codes throughout the time period).
4. Some students provided a generalized discussion of Reconstruction and never fully addressed the goals of Reconstruction regarding African Americans. Additionally, many answers were rife with implicit explanations.

*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?*

1. Encourage the development of analytical thinking. For this question students had to evaluate the extent to which the goals of Reconstruction regarding African Americans were achieved. While having a solid grasp of factual knowledge and chronology is extremely helpful, students need to analyze the significance of the information in order to successfully answer this question.
2. Stress the importance of writing a clear thesis that explicitly answers the question and covers the entire time period. It is also helpful if students put the thesis in the first paragraph for greater clarity in their writing.
3. Be sure that students read the question and answer the question asked.

**Question 5**

*What was the intent of this question?*

Question 5 offered students a complicated and multipart opportunity to demonstrate understanding of the various forces (social, political, and economic) that led to a rise of conservatism as shown by the goals of the New Right from the 1960s to the end of the Reagan presidency. Its multifaceted approach to the New Right (social, economic, and foreign), as well as the delineation of goals and implementation, allowed students multiple avenues through which to respond.

Question 5 seemed to offer both students and teachers an indication of what is to come in AP United States History. Historically, students have not had to write a stand-alone question on the 1980s. Although this question asked students to cover the prior two decades, most did not and still had to use evidence from the 1980s.

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

The mean score on Question 5 was 2.91 out of a possible 9 points.

Students were asked to address FIVE moving parts — social, economic, and foreign, PLUS goals and implementation — a task many found overwhelming. This proved quite difficult for most students. The primary difficulty students encountered was covering the time period. Most students treated the New Right in abstract terms (“The New Right Conservatives wanted . . .”) at the beginning of paragraphs dedicated to the policies of the Reagan Administration (implementation). Also, students overwhelmingly found it difficult to answer the social portion of the question. Many skipped it entirely. Those that engaged with this portion struggled to determine what qualified as a social reform (reformed welfare policies? “Just Say No?”) and in struggling to find social examples, often wrote weaker analyses of this portion of the question.

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

More often than not, essays omitted specifics about conservative movements and particular conservatives of the 1960s and 1970s. Many essays established the goals of the New Right in an overly broad and general fashion. Some students entirely omitted the 1980s, and others dealt only with the Reagan Administration. Students frequently showed misconceptions about the nature of “social” as a category of analysis. This could be because teachers have perhaps not yet begun to teach the Reagan administration specifically and the 1980s in general in social terms. Also, some students had trouble determining what to exclude from this essay and incorporated discussions of Vietnam and the Nixon administration that proved superfluous to their arguments. Finally, a sizable minority of students was confused by the term “New Right Conservative” and repeated the term mechanically as if they had only first read it as part of the question (“The New Right Conservatives wanted . . .”). Some students confused the term entirely and equated the New Right with “new rights” and discussed civil rights and the New Left. This might be because teachers are skilled (and textbooks diligent) at discussing the New Left, but still piecemeal in their discussion of the New Right and its ideological underpinnings of the Reagan Administration.

### ***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?***

In short, answer the question asked, not the one you (the student or the teacher) wished was asked. Teach students to respond to a variety of prompts. A social, economic, and political response does not work for all questions. Encourage students to respond specifically to all aspects of a prompt. Prompts asking about three decades of history ought to be answered with history drawn from the entire period. If the prompt asks about many topics (e.g., Question 5 that asked about social, economic, and foreign policy goals of the New Right, as well as requiring an evaluation of the success in implementation of those goals by the Reagan administration) the best essays respond to ALL aspects of the prompt.

It is time to teach the advent of the New Right in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century as diligently as we currently teach the rise of the New Left. New Right ideology has proven as influential on the politics of the late 20<sup>th</sup>- and early 21<sup>st</sup> -centuries as that of the New Left. When teachers introduce the beginning of the Cold War and the rise of the antiwar and Civil Rights activism, they should likewise introduce the beginnings of an ideologically distinct backlash against these movements, and against the legacy of 20<sup>th</sup>-century liberalism generally.