



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

The following comments on the 2014 free-response questions for AP[®] World History were written by the Chief Reader, Dean Ferguson of Texas A & M University-Kingsville and the Question and Exam Leaders for each question. 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 document-based question (DBQ) directly addressed Curriculum Framework Key Concept 6.2 (Global Conflicts and their Consequences) and Curriculum Framework Key Concept 6.3 (New Conceptualizations of Global Economy, Society, and Culture).

Students were asked to analyze the relationship between the Chinese peasants and the Chinese Communist Party during the period between 1925 and 1950. The documents lent themselves to an analysis that emphasized a deepening relationship over time. Because students were given several documents in both the pre-1937 and the post-1949 periods, they were able to see the results of a long process of interaction between the peasantry and the Party.

Most of the document attributions gave students ample opportunity to discuss the point of view of sources and identify an additional type of document that was not represented by those included. The detail in the documents, as well as their use of evocative language, helped the students to more effectively use the documents as evidence and support for analysis.

Readers responded positively to the scoring guidelines, which asked students to discuss relationships between the peasants and the Chinese Communist Party at most score points. Readers believed that this rewarded students for effectively answering the question.

How well did students perform on this question?

Students performed well on this question by comparison to last year. Students generally understood the question and the documents and wrote lengthy essays with some analysis. Readers observed fewer nonresponsive or off-topic discussions than in previous years. Moreover, compared to last year the mean was noticeably higher. The mean was 2.64 out of a possible 9 points, which demonstrates the quality of the question and the students' ability to respond effectively.

Students who performed well recognized the change in the relationship between the peasants and the Chinese Communist Party over time and used the documents to demonstrate this deepening relationship. Many students effectively grouped the documents in ways that showed the Communist Party's recognition of the potential power of the peasants and their need for peasant support; the Communist Party's reforms as responses to peasant concerns over land redistribution and inequities; and the combined peasant and Communist Party responses to Japanese aggression. It is gratifying to see more students attempting to perform all of the tasks demanded by the question (additional document, point of view, and grouping), although more work needs to be done to improve analysis and explanation of the relationship between the Chinese peasants and the Chinese Communist Party.

What were common student errors or omissions?

Virtually all students attempted the question and wrote longer essays with greater analysis than in the past. Errors tended to come from the students' inability to tie the documents directly to the issue of relationships between the peasants and the Chinese Communist Party. A few students were unable to effectively respond to the question and analyze the documents because they tried to frame the entire discussion as an anti-Communist narrative.

- **Core point 1** – Although many students were able to identify a relationship between the peasants and the Chinese Communist Party, their discussion was often simplistic and lacking in depth. Some students attempted to simply characterize the relationship as positive or negative or good or bad, which was not acceptable as a thesis without some qualification or explanation.
- **Core point 2** – Students tended to address all nine documents, although some students omitted a single document. Students had the most difficulty with documents 1, 4, and 7, often not clearly identifying the relationship or misreading the meanings of the documents. Students still are not analyzing the documents' dates closely or are ignoring dates completely, and thus many missed the possibility of developing their analysis around changes over time in the relationship between the Chinese peasantry and the Chinese Communist Party. Many clearly did not read the historical background, which provided the basic time frame for the question, and as a result failed to apply correctly the important skill of chronological reasoning.
- **Core point 3** – Students who understood the documents generally analyzed the documents and explained a relationship between the peasants and the Chinese Communist Party. However, some students were still using only direct quotes from the documents as sufficient to show evidence and therefore lost points. Analysis of the documents must involve student engagement with the document. The documents do not speak for themselves.
- **Core point 4** – Although many students did attempt to discuss point of view of the documents, they still did not successfully provide analysis of point of view; a few confused interpretation of the document as point of view or made vague statements about bias or reliability based on attribution of the document without any form of analysis or explanation. As in previous years, students were expected to situate the author or tone of the document. Having done this in some cases, students still did not provide an adequate *rationale* for their claim about perspective.
- **Core point 5** – Students had to provide an extended discussion of at least two documents that identified a relationship between the peasants and the Chinese Communist Party in order to constitute a usable group. To earn the core point, students needed to have at least two such groups. Students who merely listed documents, but did not have an extended discussion of at least two documents, did not receive the point. Some students also grouped the documents around characteristics other than the relationship between the peasants and the Party, which also did not earn credit. The grouping point was acquired by students who grouped documents by an identified relationship between the Communist Party and the peasantry. Other groupings, while perhaps accurate, did not reach the standard for this core point.

- **Core point 6** – Students often asked for another point of view or document that was potentially relevant but did not *explain* how it would enhance understanding of the relationship between the peasants and the Chinese Communist Party.

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 be commended for having their students address all of the requirements of the DBO. However, teachers need to continue to model and allocate time to practice parsing the question and addressing all of the requirements within the context of the tasks posed by the question. Some students are still attempting to group the documents and the essay in terms of “social-political-economic,” without considering the requirements of the question or their interpretations of the documents; this is often ineffective. Teachers need to encourage students to group the documents in direct relation to the task of the question, instead of using grouping formulas. Teachers should continue to encourage students to use all of the documents in the set and to omit none. While this particular question only required two groupings, teachers should continue to require students to develop at least three or more groups. As has been stated in the past, more needs to be done to enforce the point of view and additional document requirements as analytical tools throughout the course, and not just a requirement for this exam. These elements are most effective when integrated within the essay as a standard part of analytic writing.

Question 2

What was the intent of this question?

The question addressed directly each of the four subpoints in the Curriculum Framework Key Concept 4.1 (Globalizing Networks of Communication and Exchange) IV. The question is also tied to Curriculum Framework Key Concept 4.2 (New Forms of Social Organization and Modes of Production) I B.

The intent of this question was for students to select one of the regions provided (Latin America, including the Caribbean; sub-Saharan Africa; or Southeast Asia) and then identify and explain changes and continuities in the selected region’s participation in interregional trade between circa 1500 and 1750. In particular, the question measured the historical thinking skill of chronological reasoning (Skill 2), especially the subskill of working with patterns of change and continuity over time. The question directly addresses the fourth theme of the course (Creation, Expansion, and Interaction of Economic Systems) within a period (1500–1750) when that theme is substantially related to many other historical developments.

How well did students perform on this question?

The mean score on this question was 1.88 out of a possible 9 points.

Most students chose to write on Latin America or sub-Saharan Africa, with the majority of those selecting Latin America. Students writing on these geographic regions frequently demonstrated basic understanding of the political circumstances during this period, namely, political control of Latin America by European powers and strong European influences in Africa. Students were often able to demonstrate considerable knowledge of important background information for answering the question, for example, the Columbian Exchange, plantation production systems in Latin America, processes of acquiring slaves in Africa, and the horrible treatment and conditions African slaves endured. As a result, students had an abundance of relevant content to write about. Stronger essays described the processes and linked them to trade, while the most sophisticated essays not only tied the processes directly to interregional trade, but also used them to provide substantive analysis. Because much of this background information is germane to a discussion of trade during the period, most students were able to provide evidence in the essay that could be scored as on point, especially when they identified the products of each region. In general, students were able to provide explanation within the essays, though explanations were not always clearly linked to a change or continuity in interregional trade. Many students were also able to address the world

historical context, either by providing a third region or identifying a global pattern of trade; for example, the movement of Latin American silver to China.

What were common student errors or omissions?

Despite the fact that many students had considerable content to write about, many essays focused on changes or continuities or both in production of goods or commodities rather than articulating the changes and continuities in the interregional trade of those commodities. Students who concentrated on changes or continuities in the production processes of particular commodities could earn points for evidence, but little else. Similarly, students with considerable historical background wrote substantially about cultural diffusion, a byproduct of interregional trade, without directly addressing the changes or continuities in the trade of material goods that facilitated that diffusion. Also, many students' responses were so generic in their discussion of trade that the essays did not articulate an understanding of interregional trade. Responses that demonstrated a deliberate attempt to discuss intraregional trade as a result of a misread of the prompt, however, were not numerous. Some errors were far more common. For example, many students who chose to write about Southeast Asia actually wrote essays about China or Japan that, as a result, could earn very few points. Similarly, many essays focused on political or social changes and continuities in the regions and articulated very little about interregional trade that could be scored. Finally, the most common error by far was the inability of students to craft a thesis statement. Attempts at thesis statements were typically far too generic or only addressed a change or a continuity without incorporating an assessment of both.

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 foremost recommendation is that teachers should coach students to plan more in order to write more organized and focused essays. Teachers should coach students to take the first few minutes of the time devoted to the essay to parse the prompt carefully, identifying key task words and content areas so that they know precisely what the prompt asks them to do. Students should practice creating a plan for the essay — a grid, a flowchart, or a skeletal outline — that includes specific, on-point evidence. Using this process, students can then generate a specific and focused thesis.

As noted, teachers need to spend considerable time developing the habit of parsing the prompt with their students. This is the first, most important, step in writing an essay that is responsive to the prompt; it really is the heart of the analytic skills being measured in the essay. To that end, teachers need to spend time developing in students adequate understanding of the vocabulary of essay prompts as well as the vocabulary of the Curriculum Framework (i.e., interregional rather than intraregional). Teachers should also have students practice parsing the prompt and crafting a thesis as a joint process. Teachers should tailor this process appropriately to the level of their students, remembering that coaching a two-sentence thesis where one sentence identifies a change concretely and the second identifies a concrete continuity may lead to more student success than trying to force the students into something overly complicated. Teachers should also move away from training students to produce a generic thesis that only labels changes or continuities (perhaps based on PERSIA or APPARTS) to one that is more focused on addressing the change and continuity in the content area of the specific tasks set by the prompt.

Teachers should model global-local analysis in their classrooms, consistently linking global movements to local and regional circumstances and the reverse, explicitly identifying those links to their students, and repeatedly requiring students to practice making those links themselves.

Teachers need to ensure that their students have a solid grasp of the regions of the world and which polities or peoples comprise those regions.

Question 3

What was the intent of this question?

The intent of the question was for students to identify and explain similarities and differences in the ways two of the three empires listed (Mauryan/Gupta, Islamic Caliphates, Byzantine) used religion to rule until 1450.

The question measured the historical thinking skill of comparison and contextualization (Skill 3) and student understanding of Key Concept 2.1 (The Development and Codification of Religious and Cultural Traditions) and Key Concept 3.2 (Continuity and Innovation of State Forms and Their Interactions). The question assessed students' content and thematic knowledge of periods 2 and 3, especially their thematic understanding of the use of religion to rule.

How well did students perform on this question?

The mean score for this question was 1.73 out of 9 points.

Many students seemed to know a fair amount about the empires in question during this period, as well as the period before and afterward. There were noticeably fewer unresponsive essays, where students failed to answer the question, compared to last year, and students wrote more than often is the case for the final essay question of the exam. That said, much of the information students presented was not tied directly to the empires' use of religion to govern, which lowered scores on several rubric points. Students often wrote about the religious, cultural, political, and military histories of the regions, many times without connecting the use of religion to the purposes and strategies of governance. On the other hand, some of the stronger responses managed to apply the use of religion to multiple facets of governance, such as unification of diverse peoples through religious customs and incorporation of religious texts into law.

Though the mean score was low, numerous students did author excellent essays that related directly to state use of religion to rule in the empires selected. Students routinely earned the point for addressing similarity or difference along with the direct comparison, as most were able to write using clear and direct comparative language. Often, students adequately addressed a similarity but then were unable to complete the comparison by exploring a difference in the way the two chosen empires employed religion to rule. Students frequently failed to offer historically supported analysis or explanation of a reason, or reasons, for a similarity or difference in the ways the chosen empires used religion to govern. The small percentage of students who met the core requirements of the rubric and who wrote multiple, nuanced comparisons accompanied by analysis earned 2 expanded-core points on the 9-point scale. Though most essays were able to provide evidence connected to the topic, evidence points were at times all they earned. When students did respond to the dual components of the topic, the essays were often in the mid-high range or better.

What were common student errors or omissions?

The most frequent error was misreading or inverting the prompt, which in turn affected students' abilities to gain credit for their thesis, for addressing the question, and for employing valid evidence. Successful theses needed to address valid differences and similarities in how both empires used religion to govern. For example, to say that both empires practiced religion or were influenced by religion would not be acceptable for a complete answer to the prompt. Incomplete comparisons or inverted comparisons were problematic, as many students wrote on how religion influenced government. The prompt directed students to examine the use of religion by the state, rather than discussing how religion influenced state actors. Failed theses that were accurate as either a similarity or difference could earn 1 point for addressing these aspects.

Most students did offer examples of similarity or difference in their essays, though many of these were not credited due to the fact that they did not address comparisons between the empires' use of religion to govern. To say that both empires "were tolerant of religious minorities," for example, does not explain how that tolerance contributed to governing.

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?

Most importantly, students should learn to assess and answer the prompt. Far more mistakes were made due to misunderstanding of the question than any other single reason. It is likely that a more thorough reading of the prompt would allow students to write more effectively about what they know about the subject.

Second, teachers would be well advised to continue to work on thesis writing with students. This is, of course, an acquired skill, one that when learned often leads to stronger essays. Students should address the major parts of the prompt, qualifying their claim in a way that moves beyond the prompt itself. For example, "While both the Byzantine Empire and the Islamic Caliphates used their respective religions to unify their peoples, the Byzantine Empire relied on a secular law code with less influence from religious texts than the caliphates, which incorporated the Quran into their legal code, sharia."

Students can learn to make their comparisons more complex and always include an explanation for their claims in order to receive credit for direct comparison and analysis. For example, "Though the Islamic Caliphates incorporated the Quran into their legal code to form sharia, the Byzantines relied on a secular code with minor influences from religious texts. The difference is due to the fact that the Islamic Caliphates were heavily influenced by the ruling example of Muhammad, while the Byzantines inherited their legal traditions from the Roman Empire and its legal code."