Chief Reader Report on Student Responses:

2021 AP® Seminar Free-Response Questions

• Number of Students Scored	53,076			
• Number of Readers	760			
• Score Distribution	Exam Score	N	%At	
	5	5,869	11.1	
	4	10,341	19.5	
	3	28,917	54.5	
	2	5,673	10.7	
	1	2,276	4.3	
• Global Mean	3.22			

The following comments on the 2021 free-response questions for AP® Seminar were written by the Chief Reader, Alice Hearst, of Smith College, Northampton, MA. 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 preparation 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.

Individual Research Report	**Task:** Select a problem to research, read a variety of sources, and write a research note evaluating those materials	**Topic:** Individual contribution to a team project
	Max. Points: 30	**Mean Score:** 20.75

What were the responses to this task expected to demonstrate?

This task assessed the student's ability to:
- Investigate a particular approach or range of perspectives on a research topic selected by a student team;
- Conduct scholarly research relevant to the topic; and
- Produce an evaluative report on the research conducted, analyzing the reasoning within the sources as well as the relevance and credibility of evidence used in those sources.

How well did the responses integrate the skills required on this task?

Responses reflected a beginning mastery of basic research skills: defining a question, learning what scholarly/professional work has addressed that question on a variety of levels, parsing out an author's argument, and evaluating the weight of the evidence used to support the argument.

The table below shows how students scored this year, compared to the previous four years, on the Individual Research Report.

Individual Research Report	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021
Mean scores (Max. 30 points)	20.84	19.93	21.35	21.14	20.75

What common student misconceptions or gaps in knowledge were seen in the responses to this task?

Responses that Demonstrated Common Misconceptions/Gaps in Skills:	*Responses that Demonstrated Understanding:*
Choice of Topic	
- Chose a topic too broad or too narrow to achieve research depth - Failed to place the issue in context and explain why the issue mattered	- Chose a clearly defined and researchable topic - Clearly described why and how the issue addressed was important, including a title that gave the reader an entrée into the topic

Research and Evaluation of Evidence	
• Conducted superficial research, relying on general websites or general reference sources only • Excessively quoted information from sources without commentary, reflecting limited student understanding of the material • Ignored the sources, substituting the student's own opinion about the research topic, often repeating the general thesis or topic without elaboration or reducing a complex argument to an oversimplified generalization • Evaluated evidence superficially without regard to source, treating all sources as equal in quality and relevance • Failed to synthesize or organize research, often moving from one source to another without explanation; failed to explain why information was included • Failed to recognize the perspectives of each source, often simply summarizing each one • Used material from second-hand sources quoted in text	• Used a variety of credible, well-vetted sources, including peer-reviewed materials, selected sources indicated an awareness of the scholarly discourse • Demonstrated clear understanding of the arguments from each of the sources, allowing concise and insightful evaluation and commentary anchored in the source • Maintained a focus on reporting on and about the materials evaluated in the report, using student commentary to articulate connections among sources • Evaluated evidence purposively, explaining with attributive tags to bolster credibility and evidence • Organized and synthesized research results logically, explaining why the research was included • Explained the perspectives of each source, discussing how the sources were in conversation with one another • Tracked down second-hand information from sources to verify credibility and relevance
Attribution/Bibliography	
• Inadequately attributed material overall or failed to signal a paraphrase • Neglected to link in-text citations to bibliography • Relied heavily on URLs as citations and/or confused the tool used to locate the source (e.g., EBSCO) with the source itself (e.g., JAMA); failed to make certain that all elements were contained in bibliography	• Appropriately attributed all sources referenced • Made certain that in-text citations were listed in bibliography and vice versa • Correctly referenced original sources of materials; bibliography consistently contained all required elements
Writing Mechanics	
• Tone of report informal OR overly technical, with the latter suggesting a lack of understanding on the student's part • Contained many errors of spelling, syntax, and grammar, making paper difficult to read	• Utilized an academic writing voice able to convey complex ideas • Proofread to correct errors in spelling, syntax, and grammar
Miscellaneous	
• Exceeded word count • Uploaded incorrect assignment	• Edited for word count • Checked to make sure correct assignment uploaded

What could teachers do to improve student performance on the IRR?

- Discuss different types of sources (books, articles, journalistic pieces) to help students understand what kinds of sources are important in a research project
- Ask students to look at a reference page as a collection of authoritative voices on a topic
- Teach students to evaluate sources used within the research they are reviewing
- Practice reading academic sources and tracing a line of argument and introduce academic conventions
- Discuss the use of headings/subheadings as creating a roadmap for a reader
- Practice writing direct, specific commentary on short academic articles, then move to comparing and contrasting two perspectives and finally into synthesizing research
- Practice summarizing a research article and then applying commentary
- Ask students to translate a set of research findings into language and concepts they can understand
- Ask students to teach the findings of a research paper to each other
- Use peer review to specifically focus on whether the student is veering away from a source they are reporting on
- Use peer review/working in pairs to read each other's work to check for voice and clarity
- Remind students to use precise language throughout the report
- Urge students to use citations from the moment they begin to write
- Remind students that URLs don't necessarily contain all of the essential elements needed in a bibliography
- Help students distinguish between the tool they use to find a source (EBSCO) and the source itself
- Ask students to make a chart of the resources they have used in their report and then check that against the bibliography
- Review the rubric throughout the process to remind students what the task requires
- Hold the line on word counts
- Remind students to double-check their submissions before finalizing to ensure that they have uploaded the correct document and removed identifying information
- Remind students to review their papers via Turnitin as a plagiarism check

What resources would you recommend to teachers to better prepare their students for the skills required on IRR?

- Review student samples and commentaries on AP Central
- Use optional online modules for teachers to help clarify and demonstrate the requirements of the rubric
- Use the AP Daily videos in AP Classroom (e.g., Performance Task 1 Videos 4, 5, and 6 to help with process; UAP videos for perspectives; ESE and SUE videos for finding and selecting relevant and credible evidence).

Individual Written Argument	**Task:** Write a 2000-word, evidence-based argument	**Topic:** Research and Synthesis based on stimulus material
	Max. Points: 48	**Mean Score:** 31.98

What were the responses to this task expected to demonstrate?

This task assessed the students' ability to:
- Review a set of stimulus materials and decide on a theme derived from at least two of the sources
- Formulate a research question directly related to that theme
- Conduct research and evaluate relevant, credible and scholarly materials to answer the research question
- Formulate a well-reasoned argument with a clear line of reasoning and a plausible conclusion
- Evaluate and acknowledge counter-arguments and different perspectives
- Write a 2,000 word argument that is logically organized and supported by credible evidence

How well did the responses integrate the skills required on this task?

The table below shows how students scored this year, compared to the previous four years, on the Individual Written Argument.

Individual Written-Argument	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021
Mean scores (Max. 48 points)	31.53	28.44	26.0	29.12	31.98

What common student misconceptions or gaps in knowledge were seen in the responses to this task?

Responses that Demonstrated Common Misconceptions/Gaps in Skills:	*Responses that Demonstrate Understanding:*
Choice of Topic	
• Recycled or repurposed papers written for other courses or assignments, shoehorning in a reference to the stimulus materials but clearly not the central focus of the paper • Adopted an argument already presented in one of the stimulus sources or failed to identify a theme that connected at least **two** sources	• Developed a research question closely linked to the 2021 stimulus materials, showing student engagement and allowing those documents to inspire genuine curiosity • Discovered themes that were clearly rooted in at least two texts in the stimulus packet, including themes outside of the overarching theme of Sports

Use of Stimulus Materials/Off-Topic	
• Failed to identify a theme connecting at least two sources, often choosing just one topic from one source or presenting information about a completely unrelated issue • Utilized stimulus materials as contrived jumping-off points, mentioning them only cursorily or in discussions that did not connect the materials to the argument • Omitted any reference to stimulus materials • Used stimulus source for a definition or fact that could be more easily obtained from other, more relevant sources • Misinterpreted or misrepresented the content or context of a stimulus course	• Chose an area of inquiry that was thematically rooted in two or more documents in the stimulus packet • Integrated details from the stimulus materials, being explicit about the relevance of that material to the question and the argument • Contextualized the stimulus document to represent the source accurately • Positioned evidence from a stimulus document in conversation with evidence from other sources
Development of Research Question	
• Provided broad research questions or theses that oversimplified perspectives, claims, or conclusions • Failed to situate the research topic in a particular time or place • Failed to convey why the topic matters	• Chose an area of inquiry, typically situated in time and place, which was narrow enough to allow full development of well-defined perspectives • Clarified the research question and/or thesis, so the reader did not have to guess at the writer's intention • Provided specific and relevant details to convey why the research question is important
Evaluation of Multiple Perspectives	
• Failed to address /explore/refute opposing, competing, or alternative perspectives • Only generally compared perspectives, perhaps, for example, noting agreement or disagreement without more • Conflated lenses and perspectives, oversimplifying complex arguments • Chose lenses or perspectives inappropriate for the subject matter • Reduced a tapestry of perspectives to one source or one voice	• Explored a full spectrum of perspectives to reveal the complexity of an issue • Elaborated on the connections between perspectives by evaluating implications and limitations • Revealed a clear understanding of the difference between a lens (a filter through which to consider an issue) and a perspective (a point of view conveyed via an argument) • Engaged with the evidence and reasoning of alternate views • Strengthened impact of perspectives by linking them to valid, relevant sources

Development of Line of Reasoning

- Lacked commentary to establish an argument or meaningfully evaluate or connect with evidence or merely summarized preceding quotes

- Lacked a clear argument or made conclusions that merely summarized points or failed to align with the research question or allowed a collection of evidence to imply an argument rather than stating the argument

- Developed a weak line of reasoning with minimal or illogical connections between claims and/or ignored obvious logical flaws or clear counterpoints to claims

- Obscured the line of reasoning through formatting choices such as lack of paragraph breaks or poorly chosen subtitles

- Demonstrated the links between evidence and claims by providing commentary that engaged with the details presented in the evidence

- Took a. clearly articulated position allowing a strong student voice to drive the paper

- Presented a clear line of reasoning, explaining links between claims and allowing a strong student voice to drive the paper

- Used formatting to fully communicate the argument, such as headings and paragraph breaks

Selection and Use of Evidence

- Selected evidence primarily from journalistic or popular sources, including random blogs or social media sites

- Treated all evidence as equal in relevance or credibility without presenting commentary that could justify the use of such sources

- Relied overly on a single source

- Used a variety of well-vetted sources, including peer-reviewed journals and other academic sources

- Provided commentary to explain the relevance and credibility of evidence when it was not obvious

- Selected relevant evidence that fully supported the claims

Citation Conventions

- Attributed sources material in-text without an accompanying bibliographic entry and/or listed sources in bibliography not found in the text

- Used different attributive tags in-text and bibliography, requiring the reader to search for links (for example, using an article title in text, but beginning the bibliographic entry with author's name)

- Provided citations with missing elements, often because utilizing only a URL

- Ensured that all sources, including stimulus sources, were listed in bibliography and matched attributions in the body of the response

- Applied an academically accepted citation style consistently, including all essential elements

Grammar and Style Conventions

- Had a tone that was colloquial or overly casual, or, on the other hand, so dense that the paper became incoherent

- Obscured complex ideas by selecting vague words and/or using cumbersome syntactical choices

- Maintained an academic and stylistically appropriate voice

- Employed varied syntax and precise word choice, mostly free of grammatical errors, to enhance communication of complex ideas

How could teachers improve their student performance in the IWA?

- Practice reading and annotating college-level texts, identifying the argument, line of reasoning, and supporting evidence
- Talk explicitly and often about how to integrate stimulus materials and draw themes from two or more texts
- Teach students the importance of the "so what" question so that they learn to contextualize sources materials and frame arguments
- Practice writing commentary about articles; use the commentary to make links among texts
- Use materials online and elsewhere that discuss how to create a research question and how to use that question to drive their argument, working with them to learn how to return to the research question throughout the argument.
- Remind students how this task differs from the IRR completed earlier
- Use peer review to help students make certain that they are sustaining an argument and using evidence to support that argument; peer review can also be used to ensure that students have adopted an academic voice
- Explore academic integrity and professional ethics around plagiarism, as well as learning to paraphrase appropriately and with attribution
- As a matter of academic integrity, remind students that they cannot repurpose papers from other classes, even if the writing is their own, and point out that such papers are typically easy to spot, as the theme from the stimulus materials will often look "shoe-horned" in (or risks scoring 0 as "off-topic")
- Remind students to double-check their upload to the Digital Portfolio is the correct file in the correct place.

What resources would you recommend to teachers to better prepare their students for the skills required in the IWA?

- Work through student samples on AP Central to model what a high scoring response should look like
- Use resources on the teacher community to suggest ways of engaging students with stimulus materials
- Use optional online modules to help clarify requirements on the rubric
- Use AP Daily videos in AP Classroom (e.g., Performance Task 2 videos 1 through 14, UAP videos for perspectives, ESE and SUE videos for finding and selecting relevant and credible evidence, ESA videos for building arguments).

End-of-Course Exam, Part A **Task:** Respond to three short-answer prompts. **Topic:** Evaluate a short text, identifying the argument, line of reasoning, and effectiveness of evidence.

Max Points: 15 **Mean Score:** 10.36

What were the responses to this question expected to demonstrate?

This task asked students to read and understand an argument, identify the line of reasoning and evaluate the credibility and relevance of the evidence advanced by the author in support of that argument.

How well did the responses integrate the skills required on this question?

The table below shows how students scored this year, compared to the previous four years, on each question in Part A of the End-of-Course Exam:

EOC Exam Part A Mean scores	2017	2018	2019	2021
Q1 (3 pts max)	2.34	2.03	1.86	2.12
Q2 (6 pts max)	4.22	4.13	4.11	4.5
Q3 (6 pts max)	3.52	4.01	3.8	4.13

What common student misconceptions or gaps in knowledge were seen in the responses to this question?

Responses that Demonstrated Common Misconceptions/Gaps in Skills:	*Responses that Demonstrate Understanding:*
Identifying Argument	
- Used a direct quote from the source as the main idea, typically taken from the title - Identified only part of an argument, rather than all of its components ("libraries should be better funded," rather than libraries should be better funded because…") - Identified the main argument in vague or overgeneralized terms ("libraries matter") - Confused claims with the argument - Misstated the main idea directly ("libraries cost too much")	- Translated the author's argument into the student's own words - Identified all three components of the main idea: 1) Libraries are an important social/civic institutions that 2) need to be adequately funded because of the important services they provide, particularly 3) creating equity by bridging the digital divide - Incorporated details critical to the argument (e.g., "libraries provide internet access and other critical services to disenfranchised groups," rather than "libraries provide services for millions of people")

Explaining Line of Reasoning	
• Misidentified claims, often confusing support for the claim with the claim itself (e.g., "60% of computer users at libraries are searching of applying for jobs.") or summarized argument without understanding claims • Asserted that claims were linked without explanation or attempted to link claims using illogical or circular reasoning • Linked claims to personal opinions not contained in author's argument • Failed to note how counterclaims were addressed by author • Focused on connecting claims to evidence rather than to other claims or to the main argument • Used the term Line of Reasoning in a way that showed misunderstanding of the concept.	• Accurately identified specific claims • Contextualized and explained connections between the claims, used to build an argument • Linked claims to overall argument • Often organized by paragraphs, grouped according to central points of argument • Identified counterclaims refuted by author (e.g., "The author disproves a potential counterclaim by saying that libraries actually bring funding back to the city.") • Reflected a solid understanding of how the author constructed the argument and why it was important • Explained the author's Line of Reasoning (e.g., "Using both social and economic subclaims that show the way libraries increase profits and decrease the digital divide, Heuvel supports her argument that libraries should receive greater funding.")
Evaluating Evidence	
• Referenced evidence without evaluating whether that evidence supported a particular claim • Evaluated the credibility of sources without evaluating the actual evidence • Conflated claims with evidence • Focused only on credentials of the source or professional affiliations • Merely asserted evidence as credible or relevant without explaining how the evidence supported or failed to support the claims ("This quote gives credibility to the author's claims.")	• Identified with particularity the evidence used to support a claim • Explained both the credibility and relevance of specific pieces of evidence • Assessed how the evidence strongly or weakly supported a claim • Linked evaluation of the evidence back to the author's overall argument

What advice would you offer teachers to help them improve student performance on Part A of the Exam?

- Have students practice identifying arguments, claims, and evidence in every article they examine
- Scaffold the construction of an argument, diagramming the main argument, claims, sub-claims and evidence
- Introduce students to the general rules of argumentative writing, encouraging them to understand how authors appeal to readers
- Help students to translate an author's argument into their own words in order to be certain they understand the argument
- Remind students that complex arguments often have multiple components, not always expressly stated at the outset
- Practice looking at both claims and counterclaims, reminding them that a good argument will typically nod to, and try to refute, counterarguments
- Remind students to be explicit when explaining how specific pieces of evidence connect to a main argument
- Remind students that credibility of evidence must be assessed both in terms of its source (beyond 'John Doe teaches at X University') and its use in supporting the author's argument
- Practice evaluating the strength and weaknesses of evidence
- Remind students to write or print legibly so that a reader can keep the substance of the student's response in the forefront

What resources would you recommend to teachers to better prepare for the skills being assessed in Part A?

- Practice with prompts from earlier years
- Work through student samples on AP Central to model what high-scoring responses should look like
- Use the optional online modules for teachers to help clarify/exemplify the requirements of the rubric
- Use AP Daily Video in AP Classroom "End-of-Course Exam Video 1".

End-of-Course Exam, Part B	**Task:** Read four short stimulus pieces, identifying a theme, and develop an argument, drawing support from at least two of those four sources	**Topic:** Synthesis Essay

Max. Points: 24   **Mean Score:** 16.79

What were the responses to this question expected to demonstrate?

This question assessed students' ability to:
- Read sources critically, understanding the different perspectives presented
- Identify a theme or issue connecting the sources provided
- Use the theme as the impetus for writing a logically organized, well-reasoned and well-crafted argument, including the student's perspective
- Incorporate two or more of the sources to support the argument
- Build an argument with a series of logical claims, supported by evidence
- Cite sources using the author's name or the letter assigned to the text in the prompt

How well did the responses integrate the skills required on this question?

The table below shows how students scored this year, compared to the previous four years, on Part B of the End-of-Course Exam:

EOC Exam Part B	2017	2018	2019	2021
Mean scores (Max. 24 points)	15.88	17.9	16.95	16.79

What were common student errors or omissions?

Responses that Demonstrated Common Misconceptions/Gaps in Skills:	Responses that Demonstrate Understanding:
Using sources	
- Demonstrated a superficial reading of the provided sources - Used the argument from the first source in the packet (e.g., rewards motivate individuals more than punishment) without digging any deeper into the issues raised in the sources - Began each paragraph as "Source X says," and then merely summarized those arguments - Forced all four sources into their argument without commentary, often improperly citing those sources - Misread sources: Source B was interpreted by many students as discussing only the rewards promised by performing religious rites, rather than noting how public performance of religious rites may amount to nothing more than hypocrisy; Source C was read superficially by several students, missing the trickery/deceit used by Tom Sawyer to convince his friends to do his work for him and identified the "reward" as Tom's ability to finagle an apple from a friend rather than the reward really was dodging work; Source D was interpreted as simply showcasing the number of women winning the Nobel Prize as motivating women rather than noting the staggering gender divide between male and female recipients	- Demonstrated a careful (often critical) reading of the sources - Synthesized the sources to draw out a clear thematic link - Drew discussions of the sources together as necessary to support student's own arguments - Were deliberate in choosing source materials and specific segments of texts - Read sources correctly

Creating and Supporting an Argument	
• Failed to state a clear position or thesis or utilized a question to start the discussion without answering that question • Stated a thematic connection without offering a perspective of the student's own ("All of the sources talk about rewards…") • Articulated a thesis but then failed to develop an argument moving from claim to claim • Failed to create a clear line of reasoning supported by evidence • Failed to provide commentary on the evidence, leaving the reader to make assumptions about its validity and relevance • Failed to link evidence to specific claims in student's own argument	• Crafted a thoughtful, arguable thesis that was clearly communicated to the reader (e.g., arguing in favor of various reward systems to motivate students to do their work, or identifying a specific area and discussed ways to use positive and negative reinforcements) • Strategically selected and syntheses perspectives and information from the sources to support a compelling argument, both within paragraphs or throughout the argument as a whole (e.g., students paired sources A and B to discuss motivating power of rewards; Source A provided scientific backing of the claim that positive reinforcement motivates behavior, while Source B pointed to the intrinsic rewards of doing good deeds) • Created signposts to clue the reader into steps in building the argument; employed transitions to guide the reader from claim to claim • Drew evidence from the sources and commented appropriately, tying the evidence drawn from the sources to specific points in the student's own argument • Interpreted evidence by exploring implications, limitations, and/or objections
Applying Conventions	
• Neglected to outline the argument before writing, resulting in failed or circuitous lines of reasoning and confusing arguments • Neglected to edit or proofread for grammar and syntax and to ensure that sources were correctly cited • Paid little attention to word choice • Quoted from sources without quotation marks, introductions, or parenthetical citations • Wrote illegibly	• Clearly outlined or thought out the argument before beginning to write • Edited for errors in grammar/syntax • Wrote in an academic style, choosing appropriate language • Skillfully attributed, cited, or embedded source material • Wrote legibly

What advice would you offer to teachers to help their students improve their skills on this task?

- Remind the students to pay attention to the task directions, finding a theme, and then creating an argument; many students would recognize the general theme and write about that for the first several paragraphs rather than moving into an argument
- Suggest that students annotate sources before outlining an argument, and if possible, put them in conversation with one another; writing in the test booklet should not start until the first two tasks noted are complete
- Remind students to choose two of the sources as support, reviewing with them what it means to draw support from a text
- Practice in peer groups to make sure that each student knows how to incorporate an answer to the "so what" question embedded in the student's argument
- Practice getting sources to talk to one another
- Practice writing commentary on various sources, going beyond summary to interpret and critique
- Teach students to discern the difference between the author of a source and a source cited by an author within a text
- Teach students to use transitions and signpost their argument
- Encourage proofreading
- Encourage legible writing

What resources would you recommend to teachers to better prepare for the skills being assessed in Part B?

- Practice with prompts from earlier years
- Work through student samples on AP Central to model what high-scoring responses should look like
- Use the optional online modules for teachers to help clarify/exemplify the requirements of the rubric
- Use AP Daily Video in AP Classroom "End-of-Course Exam Video 2."