

2024



AP[®] Seminar

Free-Response Questions

Set 1

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AP SEMINAR

Part A

Suggested time — 30 minutes

Directions: Read the passage below and then respond to the following three questions.

1. Identify the author’s argument, main idea, or thesis. (3 points)
2. Explain the author’s line of reasoning by identifying the claims used to build the argument and the connections between them. (6 points)
3. Evaluate the effectiveness of the evidence the author uses to support the claims made in the argument. (6 points)

Write your responses to Part A only on the designated pages in the separate Free Response booklet.

From “Go Ahead, Laugh!”

By Patrick Malone (*Public Management*, Vol. 98, Issue 6, July 2016)

Humor in the workplace can be a double-edged sword. It pre-supposes a balance of taste, timing, and intellect. For some reason though, organizations still exist where humor is seen as detrimental to professionalism.

Laughter can be met with a look of scorn and disapproval, and those that engage in such frivolity are seen as less-than-serious, less-than-committed, or less-than-capable contributors to the mission of the work at hand. . . .

According to Alison Beard in her 2014 *Harvard Business Review* article “Leading with Humor,” a 40-year-old adult laughs [just] four times per day, despite exposure to a much greater array of stimuli [than a young child]. Sadly, we laugh less as we age.

A 2002 study of 2,500 Australians concluded that more than half would take a cut in wages in order to have more fun at work.¹ Research by Gallup also suggested that people who are not engaged in their workplace laugh less during the workweek than during the weekends.² . . .

So is it possible to have both a committed workforce and one that has a little fun at the office? Yes. Is there a differentiation to be made between having a sober disposition and having a little fun while you do your job? There is.

The former can create a host of problems in the workplace. The latter can bring significant benefits to the body, mind, and organization. . . .

In a purely anatomical and physiological context, laughter is a full-body endeavor. . . . This physiological symphony improves the immune function by increasing immune cells and infection-fighting antibodies. In one study published in *The American Journal of the Medical Sciences*, Lee Berk of Loma Linda University and William Fry of Stanford drew on several years of research to assess whether laughter impacted the body’s ability to manufacture cortisol, a hormone known to suppress immune function.³ . . . They determined that laughter actually increased the production of cells that help the body to fight infection.

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Healthy laughter can also improve the elasticity and function of blood vessels, protecting against cardiovascular disease. Medical researchers Michael Miller and William Fry at the University of Maryland’s School of Medicine, for example, have had success in linking laughter to increasing blood flow.⁴ Their results strongly suggest that laughter has an impact on the endothelium, the tissue that makes up the inner lining of blood vessels, allowing it to more readily dilate and expand, increasing blood flow to the heart, lungs, and brain. . . .

According to research at Stanford, a hefty dose of humor also helps the brain normalize dopamine levels, which has positive effects on motivation, attention span, mood, and learning. Researchers discovered that when participants looked at funny cartoons, components of the limbic system were stimulated that regulate this important neurotransmitter.⁵ . . .

Finally, the production of endorphins created by laughter benefits our minds by allowing us to focus more readily on the tasks at hand. By reducing stress levels and enhancing our stores of mental energy, laughter permits our minds to free up from previously overwhelming thoughts and emotions. The resultant balance of mind, body, and emotion opens the door to inspiration, hope, and engagement with others. . . .

Nowhere is the role of humor and laughter tested more intensely than in the workplace. The combination of deadlines, external pressures, and personality conflicts make for a less-than-optimal setting for comedic repartee. The benefits of laughter in the workplace, however, are significant.

Laughter in an organization is a guaranteed morale booster that can build trust. People enjoy coming to work when they feel connected to those with whom they serve, and when they feel good while they’re there. . . . Shared laughter allows people to be comfortable letting their guard down and showing their authentic selves. This window to vulnerability is a foundation for building trust.

An environment infused with humor can also increase innovation. One study by Chris Robert at the University of Missouri-Columbia revealed that humor is something that is generated from inconsistency, meaning that people are more likely to laugh at things that do not normally fit together.⁶ The very combination of words or deeds that don’t customarily tie with one another stirs a reaction. As Robert notes, this is the same thing that occurs in the creative mind—putting variables together that do not normally belong that way. It’s the foundation of creativity from which so many organizations can benefit.

Robert also goes on to suggest that productivity and employee retention is positively impacted by humor. Since humor leads to positive emotions, and positive emotions make individuals feel good, they naturally communicate better, become more committed team members, and work harder. This also improves retention since happy, productive workers are less likely to leave their jobs. . . .

Finally, a 2012 study published in the *Journal of Managerial Psychology* revealed a comprehensive listing of organizational benefits to workplace humor.⁷ This research concluded that humor is connected with several positive workplace outcomes, including improved performance, enhanced employee satisfaction, better workgroup cohesion, healthier employees, less burnout, and reduced stress. . . .

Laughter is still somewhat of a mystery to modern science. This is partly due to the challenges in creating the proper scientifically sound settings in which to test the impacts of humor. Controlled environments aren’t always the most conducive to natural reactions. After all, if laughter is nothing else, it is a natural reaction.

¹ Rogers, J. (2002). “Humor Helps the Boss’s Bottom Line.” *The Gold Coast Bulletin*.

² Harter, Jim. (2012). “Mondays Not so Blue for Engaged Employees.” Gallup.

³ Berk, L. S. et al. (1989). “Neuroendocrine and Stress Hormone Changes during Mirthful Laughter.” *The American Journal of the Medical Sciences*, Vol.298(6).

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- ⁴ Miller, M. and Fry, W.F. (2009). “The Effect of Mirthful Laughter on the Human Cardiovascular System.” *Med Hypotheses*, Vol. 73(5).
- ⁵ Mobbs, D, et al. (2003). “Humor Modulates the Mesolimbic Reward Centers.” *Neuron*, Vol. 40(5).
- ⁶ Robert, C. and Yan, W. (2007). “The Case for Developing New Research on Humor and Culture in Organizations: Toward a Higher Grade of Manure,” in Joseph J. Martocchio (ed.) *Research in Personnel and Human Resources Management*. Vol. 26.
- ⁷ Mesmer Magnus, J., Glew, D.J., and Viswesvaran, C. (2012) “A Meta Analysis of Positive Humor in the Workplace.” *Journal of Managerial Psychology*, Vol. 27(2).

“Go Ahead, Laugh!” by Patrick Malone, from *Public Management* Vol. 98 (6). © 2016, Patrick Malone.

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Part B

Suggested time — 1 hour and 30 minutes

Directions: Read the four sources carefully, focusing on a theme or issue that connects them and the different perspective each represents. Then, write a logically organized, well-reasoned, and well-written argument that presents your own perspective on the theme or issue you identified. You must incorporate at least two of the sources provided and link the claims in your argument to supporting evidence. You may also use the other provided sources or draw upon your own knowledge. In your response, refer to the provided sources as Source A, Source B, Source C, or Source D, or by the author’s name.

Write your response to Part B only on the designated pages in the separate Free Response booklet.

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Source B

From “High-school seniors’ college enrollment goals: Costs and benefits of ambitious expectations”

By Brandilynn J. Villarreal, Jutta Heckhausen, Jared Lessard, Ellen Greenberger, and Chuansheng Chen (*Journal of Adolescence*, Vol. 45, Issue 1, 2015)

Costs and benefits of ambitious expectations

High educational expectations are an important source of motivation for youth, particularly when obstacles arise or when other factors, such as lack of resources, threaten goal attainment. . . . High expectations reflect optimism and ambitiousness, two constructs which, in their own right, have been shown to promote perseverance when encountering difficulties. Optimistic biases, in particular, have been linked to higher levels of educational attainment, subjective well-being, and general health. . . .

However, high educational expectations per se are not always beneficial. . . . Cultural values (e.g., “The American Dream”) and societal institutions (e.g., a multi-tier school system) influence the impact of ambitiousness on educational outcomes. For example, Heckhausen and Chang (2009) investigated the impact of ambitious long-term expectations among youth in two countries with different educational systems: Germany and the United States. In Germany, youth are channeled into different career trajectories early on through vocational training and apprenticeships, with little opportunity for later switching. In the U.S., even youth who perform poorly in high school have the opportunity to obtain post-secondary education. In the German system, aspirations are most effective when they are calibrated to academic performance and resources. . . . Heckhausen and Chang (2009) found that in the U.S., ambitious expectations, regardless of performance or resources, are most effective in producing high educational attainment. Thus, the benefits of high expectations depend on cultural value systems and the societally institutionalized opportunities and constraints in the individual’s environment. . . .

What happens if one falls short of one’s expectations?

One of the reasons it is difficult to make generalizations about the impact of falling short of educational expectations is that responses to failure vary and are highly dependent on attributions. . . . For some young people, failure might damage their self-concept, feelings of self-worth, and sense of competence. . . .

In part due to the possible negative consequences of falling short of one’s expectations, some educators have argued for a more realistic matching or congruence of expectations with academic preparation, performance, and abilities. . . . In line with this reasoning, . . . researchers have cautioned against promoting high expectations in adolescents when there is a significant mismatch between academic performance, resources, and students’ expectations.

Other researchers have argued in favor of fostering ambitious expectations. For example, even if youth fall short of their expectations, they have considerable control over their lives—more control than other age groups—as well as several viable alternatives to pursue if they do not attain their goal. . . . Rather than ruminate on not attaining the goal, youth are likely to continue pursuing other goals, such as alternative educational goals or career and family goals. Several researchers . . . have shown that individuals use a variety of compensatory strategies to reduce possible negative consequences after failure or when goals become temporarily unavailable. For example, individuals downwardly adjust goals to focus on those which are more attainable, use self-protective strategies to maintain self-esteem, or disengage from the goal altogether. These strategies allow the individual to protect existing motivational resources and re-engage with new and more attainable goals.

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Source C

“Quest”

By Carrie Williams Clifford (*The Widening Light*, 1922)

My goal out-distances the utmost star,
Yet is encompassed in my inmost Soul;
I *am* my goal—my quest, to know myself.
To chart and compass this unfathomed sea,
Myself must plumb the boundless universe.
My Soul contains all thought, all mystery,
All wisdom of the Great Infinite Mind:
This is to discover, I must voyage far,
At last to find it in my pulsing heart.

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Source D

From “This Eminent Scientist Says Climate Activists Need to Get Real.”

By David Marchese (*The New York Times*, April 22, 2022)

The “really” in the title of Vaclav Smil’s newest book, “How the World Really Works: The Science Behind How We Got Here and Where We’re Going,” is doing some heavy lifting. Implicit in the renowned energy scientist’s usage is the idea that most of us are uninformed or just plain wrong about the fundamentals of the global economy. He aims to correct that—to recenter materials rather than electronic flows of data as the bedrock of modern life—largely through examining what he calls the four pillars of modern civilization: cement, steel, plastics and ammonia. (The production and use of all four currently requires burning huge amounts of fossil carbon.) Which brings us back to that “really.” In the context of Smil’s book, . . . the word is also a rebuke to those calling for rapid decarbonization in order to combat global warming. “I am not talking about what *could* be done,” says Smil, . . . “I’m looking at the world as it *is*.”

[The following is from an interview with Vaclav Smil.]

[Marchese:] . . . [I]f rapid decarbonization isn’t feasible, then what’s the best way to stop heating the planet?

[Smil:] The most important thing to understand is the scale. An energy transition affecting a country of one million people is very different from a transition affecting a nation of more than one billion. . . . This is where we are in terms of global civilization: This transition has to happen on a billion and trillion scales. . . . People toss out these deadlines without any reflection on the scale and the complexity of the problem. . . .

[Marchese:] I understand the problem of setting difficult goals, but aren’t goals necessary for orienting our actions? What’s the point of setting goals which cannot be achieved?

[Smil:] People call it aspirational. I call it delusional. We are forging ahead with more S.U.V.s, we are building bigger houses, we want to invent new techniques to make more steel. But do we need all that more and bigger? I’m not against setting a goal. I’m all for realistic goals. I will not yield on this point. It’s misleading and doesn’t serve any use because we will not achieve it, and then people say, What’s the point? I’m all for goals but for strict realism in setting them.

[Marchese:] When you talk about S.U.V.s and building bigger houses [as contributing to the climate problem], you’re really talking about people’s consumption choices. Do you think changing those is an easier goal than decarbonizing?

[Smil:] Well, we changed people’s consumption by letting them have their S.U.V.s. We can change people the other way. We could say, to save the planet people should drive smaller cars. If you drive a smaller car, you get a rebate. If you drive an S.U.V., you pay a surcharge. There are many ways to go around bringing rational goals. You don’t have to invent new things to solve these problems. This promise of inventions—3-D printing! Houses will be printed! Cars will be printed! Have you seen any printed houses and cars? We live in this world of exaggerated promises and delusional pop science. I’m trying to bring it onto some modest track of reality and common sense. . . .

[Marchese:] Couldn’t we think about the problem of decarbonization [as a goal]? Like, yes, maybe the effort to transition to renewables won’t work, but the potential upside is enormous. Why not operate according to that logic?

[Smil:] This is the misunderstanding people have: that we’ve been slothful and neglectful and doing nothing. True, we have too many S.U.V.s and build too many big houses and waste too much food. But at the same time we are constantly transitioning and innovating. We went from coal to oil to natural gas, and then as we were moving into natural gas we moved into nuclear electricity, and we started building lots of large hydro, and they do not emit any

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carbon dioxide directly. So we've been transitioning to lower-carbon sources or noncarbon sources for decades. Moreover, we've been making our burning of carbon much more efficient. We are constantly transitioning to more efficient, more effective and less environmentally harmful things. So, yes, we've been wasteful, but our engineers are not asleep. . . .

[Marchese:] Does your understanding of the science around energy and climate change compel you in any particularly political directions?

[Smil:] No. . . . You can be on this side or that side, but the real world works on the basis of natural law and thermodynamics and energy conversions. . . . We need less politics to solve our problems. We need to look at the realities of life and to see how we can practically affect them. . . .

[Marchese:] [Can solutions come?] Not today. Maybe tomorrow.

[Smil:] . . . What we need is the dull, factually correct and accurate middle. Because only from that middle will come the solutions. Solutions never come from extremes. . . . You have to recognize the realities of the world, and the realities of the world tend to be unpleasant, discouraging and depressing.

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