

Chief Reader Report on Student Responses: 2021 AP[®] English Language and Composition Free-Response Questions

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|-----------------------------|------------|---------|------|
| • Number of Students Scored | 518,548 | | |
| • Number of Readers | 2409 | | |
| • Score Distribution | Exam Score | N | %At |
| | 5 | 46,997 | 9.1 |
| | 4 | 118,757 | 22.9 |
| | 3 | 133,659 | 25.8 |
| | 2 | 152,115 | 29.3 |
| | 1 | 67,020 | 12.9 |
| • Global Mean | 2.86 | | |

The following comments on the 2021 free-response questions for AP[®] English Language and Composition were written by the Chief Reader, Akua Duku Anokye of Arizona State University. 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.

Question #1**Task:** Synthesis**Topic:** Place of Handwriting
Instruction in School**Max. Points:** 6**Mean Score:** 3.97***What were the responses to this question expected to demonstrate?***

The synthesis prompt for this year asked students to use material from six provided sources and develop a position on the place, if any, of handwriting instruction in today’s schools. Students were expected to respond to the prompt with a thesis that presented a defensible position; select and use evidence from at least three of the provided sources to support their line of reasoning—indicating clearly the sources used through direct quotations, paraphrase, or summary; explain how the evidence supported their line of reasoning; and use appropriate grammar and punctuation in communicating their argument. The skills required included 2.A, 4.A, 4.B, 4.C, 6.A, 6.B, 6.C, 8.A, 8.B, and 8.C.

How well did the responses address the course content related to this question? How well did the responses integrate the skills required on this question?

We expected these students to develop an argument that consistently demonstrated their understanding of the distinctions being made about cursive vs. manuscript instruction and its importance or lack thereof. This prompt was highly accessible, and nearly all students were able to frame a recognizable response. Their theses were clearly articulated in almost all cases. It appeared that the combination of the new scoring guide and the new stable wording has helped students in that way. The Question Leader makes the important observation that “many lower-half papers were written by students who combed through sources looking for ‘support’ for their own arguments, instead of engaging with the sources,” which was the ultimate aim. By the same token, there were some very accessible places for students to question/engage critically with the sources, and many did so very well. The higher-performing students were also expected to use the sources in conversation with one another in ways that would reveal their sophisticated writing and thinking and their ability to synthesize information in service of their own argument.

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

| <i>Common Misconceptions/Knowledge Gaps</i> | <i>Responses that Demonstrate Understanding</i> |
|--|---|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Many lower-half papers were written by students who combed through sources looking for “support” for their own arguments, instead of engaging with the sources, which was the ultimate aim. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Students who read the sources critically had an easier time than students who read them credulously. |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Because the sources were quite accessible, students found support and then went for the quote/paraphrase/quote/paraphrase approach typical for a developing writer struggling to understand what the task really is. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Higher-performing students used the sources in conversation with one another in ways that would reveal their sophisticated writing and thinking and their ability to synthesize information in service of their own argument. |

Based on your experience at the AP® Reading with student responses, what advice would you offer teachers to help them improve the student performance on the exam?

One important objective for teachers to consider when teaching how to write a well-developed synthesis essay is the skill of putting sources in conversation with one another. While the sources are there to help the students find support for their own argument, students who are prepared to not only read the sources critically but use them to explore deeper connections within the argument excel in this task.

What resources would you recommend to teachers to better prepare their students for the content and skill(s) required on this question?

- Teachers will find example responses from this particular question on AP Central, along with scoring notes and specific commentary explaining why each point was or was not earned.
- The 2021 Course and Exam Description for English Language includes a diverse collection of resources, including the Instructional Approaches section which has a dedicated description of approaches for the Synthesis FRQ.
- Teachers will find formative assessment practice for Synthesis in the Unit 3, Unit 6, and Unit 9 AP Classroom Personal Progress Checks. These FRQs are scaffolded to provide students with support as they practice synthesizing sources and constructing their own argumentation.
- Many of the AP Daily Videos will support building students' skills specifically for the Synthesis FRQ. The videos that accompany Unit 3, 6, and 9 are particularly useful for students who need practice for this FRQ. Listed below are *some* of the AP Daily AP Daily videos that offer a range of entry points for students who are working to develop and refine their Synthesis skills.
 - Unit 3: Skill 4.A Daily Video 1
 - Unit 3: Skill 4.A Daily Video 2
 - Unit 3: Skill 4.A Daily Video 3
 - Unit 6: Skill 3.A Daily Video 1
 - Unit 6: Skill 3.A Daily Video 2
 - Unit 6: Skill 4.A Daily Video 1
 - Unit 9: Skill 4.C Daily Video 1
 - Unit 9: Skill 4.C Daily Video 2

Question #2**Task:** Rhetorical Analysis**Topic:** Obama Speech Dedicating the Rosa Parks Statue in 2013**Max. Points:** 6**Mean Score:** 3.53***What were the responses to this question expected to demonstrate?***

The rhetorical analysis prompt asked students to read an excerpt from a 2013 speech delivered by former president Barack Obama dedicating the Rosa Parks statue in the National Statuary Hall of the United States Capitol building. They were then asked to write an essay that analyzed the rhetorical choices Obama made to convey his message. Students were expected to respond to the prompt with a thesis that analyzed the writer’s rhetorical choices; select and use evidence to support their line of reasoning; explain how the evidence supported their line of reasoning; demonstrate an understanding of the rhetorical situation; and use appropriate grammar and punctuation in communicating their argument. The skills expected to be demonstrated in this writing included 1.A, 2.A, 4.A, 4.B, 4.C, 6.A, 6.B, 6.C, 8.A, 8.B, and 8.C.

How well did the responses address the course content related to this question? How well did the responses integrate the skills required on this question?

The Question Leader remarks, “As one would expect, this prompt proved very accessible to students. Both the language and the rhetorical situation were clear, allowing students to engage the task of evaluating the rhetorical choices Obama made to convey his message of both commemorating and memorializing Rosa Parks, while also calling the audience to action to be like Rosa Parks in the smaller, consistent actions that she did. As one student so eloquently said, ‘we should all be Rosas,’ capturing the lofty ideals Obama conveys.” We expected and were not disappointed when the vast majority of responses earned the thesis point and demonstrated a clear line of reasoning, although there was a varying degree of success in their explanations of how their observations conveyed meaning (demonstrating the skills of rhetorical analysis and explaining Obama’s choices).

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

| <i>Common Misconceptions/Knowledge Gaps</i> | <i>Responses that Demonstrate Understanding</i> |
|--|--|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Many lower-half papers substituted description or summary. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Responses that took on discussing specific moments in the text (rhetorical choices) at some point observed why Obama would have included that text, even if it was to observe that Obama wanted the audience to see Rosa Parks from a specific perspective (as an everyday person and not just a myth, for example). |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Some responses struggled with the concept of commentary. They could describe what Obama said, effectively converting Obama’s English into their English, but they could not offer explanations as to why he would have included certain textual moments. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Students who understood the concept of commentary could connect why a rhetorical choice was relevant to conveying Obama’s message. That connection between commentary and thesis established a line of reasoning, demonstrating how (most) pieces of evidence identified contributed to the overall message. |

- Other responses understood that an explanation of rhetorical choices was needed, but they were either inaccurate or substituted something simplistic, like defining what a Biblical allusion is instead of explaining why this specific allusion (the ancient walls of Jericho, for example) was particularly relevant to this content (comparable to the Civil Rights Movement). Again, these responses clearly demonstrated that test takers had read and understood Obama’s speech, so the challenge came in demonstrating the skills of rhetorical analysis and explaining his choices.

- Upper-level writers chose multiple approaches to demonstrate their understanding of the passage and its task. Some simply touched on a wider array of rhetorical choices, commenting on how all choices connected to the thesis to accomplish a more thorough analysis. Some focused on fewer key moments and then did a more thorough job of explaining how they functioned (for example, discussing how the “through a glass darkly” Scripture reference would work considering that Obama is critiquing the American public for not more consistently pointing out and addressing inequality). And some not only identified key choices, but then analyzed both their individual functions and how they were organized to build on each other to convey Obama’s message.
- Some responses explained how multiple audiences hearing the 2013 speech would react to rhetorical choices differently: for instance, people for whom Rosa Parks is only a passing historical reference would be impacted differently when learning about Parks’s background than those audience members from the Civil Rights Movement who had known her personally. Others observed that while one faction of the audience might have been moved by Rosa Parks paving a way so Obama could “stand here today,” another faction of the audience might not have been pleased by his presidency, and they explained how Obama’s rhetorical choices navigated that reality.
- Other responses saw the complexity in some of the rhetorical moves which, while easy to read, were perhaps more difficult to execute, and their discussions of how those moves worked showed a more sophisticated understanding than responses that merely glanced past the same moment as being a surface level feature.

Based on your experience at the AP® Reading with student responses, what advice would you offer teachers to help them improve the student performance on the exam?

We continue to encourage teachers to focus on the “how” rather than on the naming of individual rhetorical terms, and we are seeing an improvement in refocusing on the complexities of the passages analyzed, particularly on understanding the rhetorical situation as a key to analysis.

What resources would you recommend to teachers to better prepare their students for the content and skill(s) required on this question?

- Teachers will find example responses from this particular question on AP Central, along with scoring notes and specific commentary explaining why each point was or was not earned.
- The 2021 Course and Exam Description for English Language includes a diverse collection of resources, including the Instructional Approaches section, which has a dedicated description of approaches for the Rhetorical Analysis FRQ.
- Teachers will find formative assessment practice for Rhetorical Analysis in the Unit 1, Unit 4, and Unit 7 AP Classroom Personal Progress Checks. These FRQs are scaffolded to provide students with support as they practice examining the rhetorical situation and rhetorical choices that authors employ.
- Many of the AP Daily Videos will support building students’ skills specifically for the Rhetorical Analysis FRQ. The videos that accompany Unit 1, 4, and 7 are particularly useful for students who need practice for this FRQ. Listed below are *some* of the AP Daily videos that offer a range of entry points for students who are working to develop and refine their Rhetorical Analysis skills.
 - Unit 1: Skill 1.A Daily Video 1
 - Unit 1: Skill 1.A Daily Video 2
 - Unit 1: Skill 1.A Daily Video 3
 - Unit 4: Skill 3.B Daily Video 1
 - Unit 4: Skill 3.B Daily Video 2
 - Unit 7: Skill 1.A Daily Video 1
 - Unit 7: Skill 1.A Daily Video 2
 - Unit 7: Skill 7.C Daily Video 1
 - Unit 7: Skill 7.C Daily Video 2
 - Unit 3: Skill 4.A Daily Video 1
 - Unit 3: Skill 4.A Daily Video 2
 - Unit 3: Skill 4.A Daily Video 3
 - Unit 3: Skill 6.C Daily Video 2
 - Unit 6: Skill 3.A Daily Video 1
 - Unit 6: Skill 3.A Daily Video 2
 - Unit 6: Skill 4.A Daily Video 1
 - Unit 9: Skill 4.C Daily Video 1
 - Unit 9: Skill 4.C Daily Video 2

Question #3**Task:** Argument**Topic:** On the Value of Striving for Perfection**Max. Points:** 6**Mean Score:** 3.41***What were the responses to this question expected to demonstrate?***

The argument prompt for this year’s exam asked students to write an essay that argued their position on the value of striving for perfection. In their responses they were expected to respond to the prompt with a thesis that presented a defensible position, provide evidence to support their line of reasoning, explain how the evidence supported their line of reasoning, and use appropriate grammar and punctuation in communicating their argument. The skills expected to be demonstrated in this writing included 2.A, 4.A, 4.B, 4.C, 6.A, 6.B, 6.C, 8.A, 8.B, and 8.C.

How well did the responses address the course content related to this question? How well did the responses integrate the skills required on this question?

The prompt was highly accessible to the students. In the words of the Question Leader, this prompt allowed test takers to demonstrate “how much the topic was highly relevant to their current realities: pressures of the school system, expectations of family, competition in sports (at both professional and high school levels), messages found on social media, impact of the coronavirus, challenges of sibling rivalry” were among the examples test takers used. The Question Leader continues, “Students connected to the topic in surprising, powerful, and beautiful ways. That level of connection extended to even the lower-scoring essays. Even responses that struggled with the abstraction of ‘perfection,’ could still articulate a position.” Students were expected to offer specific evidence and, most importantly, demonstrate that they could develop a clear line of reasoning that was logically organized and cohesive in presentation with all pieces working together in service of their argument. Stronger essays used commentary to explain how the evidence supported the larger claim.

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

| <i>Common Misconceptions/Knowledge Gaps</i> | <i>Responses that Demonstrate Understanding</i> |
|---|--|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Some responses struggled with the abstraction of “perfection.” | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Even responses that struggled with the abstraction of “perfection,” could still articulate a position. Students were expected to offer specific evidence and, most importantly, demonstrate that they could develop a clear line of reasoning that was logically organized and cohesive in presentation with all pieces working together in service of their argument. |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Some of the responses came at the prompt tangentially, focusing on the opening of the prompt about perfection, with the connection to striving left implicit. While this was a fine choice, it kept some from tackling the prompt in all its richness and complexity. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Stronger essays used commentary to explain how the evidence supported the larger claim. Most responses took a position, making a defensible claim. Some saved the clearest articulation of it for the conclusion, which was completely acceptable. Responses also engaged with the topic, with students |

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| | <p>showing a refreshing willingness to draw on evidence from the world they know: pop culture, dystopian novels, films—frequently paired with more conventional forms of evidence—personal experience, history, well-known examples from the news.</p> |
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Based on your experience at the AP® Reading with student responses, what advice would you offer teachers to help them improve the student performance on the exam?

Teachers can make good use of the scoring guide for both their instruction and for student self-reflection, particularly as related to the crucial Row B, starting with its title: “Evidence and Commentary.” The descriptor for both a score of 3 and 4 includes “provides specific evidence.” Responses that were more specific with evidence were more successful. A number of responses referenced school, for example, but those that moved beyond general statements and provided details (“93% for an A, 90% for an A-, 59% for an F—students drown in these numbers”) created compelling responses. Hypothetical evidence, while it could be fleshed out in ways that made it specific, were often not as successful.

In terms of commentary, the definition of “line of reasoning” is instructive: “logical organization and cohesive presentation in which all pieces work together in service of an argument.” It looked like students (or their teachers) emphasized logical organization as using transition words, rather than seeing that structure can be more complicated and nuanced than that. Focusing on the pieces working together in service of the argument would be helpful. Students whose commentary explained how the evidence supported the larger claim had stronger essays.

What resources would you recommend to teachers to better prepare their students for the content and skill(s) required on this question?

- Teachers will find example responses from this particular question on AP Central, along with scoring notes and specific commentary explaining why each point was or was not earned.
- The 2021 Course and Exam Description for English Language includes a diverse collection of resources, including the Instructional Approaches section which has a dedicated description of approaches for the Argument FRQ.
- Teachers will find formative assessment practice for Argument in the Unit 2, Unit 5, and Unit 8 AP Classroom Personal Progress Checks. These FRQs are scaffolded to provide students with support as they practice constructing their own argumentation.
- Many of the AP Daily Videos will support building students’ skills specifically for the Argument FRQ. The videos that accompany Unit 2, 5, and 8 are particularly useful for students who need practice for this FRQ. Listed below are *some* of the AP Daily videos that offer a range of entry points for students who are working to develop and refine their Argument skills.
 - Unit 2: Skill 2.B Daily Video 1
 - Unit 2: Skill 2.B Daily Video 2
 - Unit 2: Skill 2.B Daily Video 3
 - Unit 5: Skill 6.A Daily Video 1
 - Unit 5: Skill 6.A Daily Video 2
 - Unit 8: Skill 8.A Daily Video 1
 - Unit 8: Skill 8.A Daily Video 2