



Student Performance Q&A: 2003 AP[®] German Free-Response Questions

The following comments on the 2003 free-response questions for AP[®] German were written by the Chief Reader, Truett Cates of Austin College in Austin, Texas. 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.

Paragraph Completion

What was the intent of this question?

This part of the exam is designed to elicit precise and accurate responses. Students demonstrate they understand the text passage by inserting a correct German word or words in a blank. In creating passages, the Development Committee often uses authentic material that has been slightly modified. In this case, the committee opted for a letter composed specifically for the exam. The deletions for testing purposes offered students the opportunity to demonstrate a breadth of vocabulary, sensitivity to structure and idiom, and precision of spelling and capitalization, all within the context of the passage. The vocabulary and idioms required to fill in the blanks were all relatively high frequency.

How well did students perform on this question?

The mean score for the Standard Group was 12.59 out of a possible 20 points.* The mean score for all students was 13.65 out of a possible 20 points. This year's selection yielded higher scores for the Standard Group than in 2002 but lower scores than in 2001. (The mean scores out of a possible 20 points for the Standard Group in 2000 was 9.1; in 2001, 12.4; and in 2002, 11.4.)

Readers generally found the section to be well designed; their impression was that the scores reflected the students' ability. At the debriefing they found it to be a fair and reasonable approach to this type of exercise and also found the variety of aspects tested to be good.

What were common student errors or omissions?

Capitalization or lack of capitalization was sometimes a cause for lost points. Problems on individual questions were as follows:

* The Standard Group does not include students who speak the language at home or who have lived for more than two months in a country where German is the native language.

Correct Item(s)	Common Errors
1. <i>als, dass, daß, weil, da</i>	<i>Wenn, wann</i>
2. <i>mich, uns, unsere Familie...</i>	Case errors
3. <i>Ein</i>	Case errors
4. <i>gelesen, bekommen, geöffnet, ...</i>	Incorrect participial form
5. <i>Um, ich versuchte</i>	Inappropriate vocabulary items
6. <i>finden, herausfinden, lesen</i>	Inappropriate vocabulary items
7. <i>sind, sind so</i>	Singular for plural
8. <i>Tag, Morgen, Nachmittag</i>	Inappropriate vocabulary items
9. <i>weit, weit weg, fern, so weit, ...</i>	Inappropriate vocabulary items
10. <i>schwimmen, baden, planschen, ...</i>	Inappropriate vocabulary items
11. <i>habe, hatte</i>	Plural for singular
12. <i>arbeitet, schuftet, arbeitete früher, ...</i>	Inappropriate vocabulary items
13. <i>Sohn, Jungen, Knaben, Buben</i>	Inappropriate vocabulary items
14. <i>Zeit, Freizeit, meiner Zeit</i>	Inappropriate vocabulary items
15. <i>Zu</i>	No discernable pattern
16. <i>ihnen, denen, Kindern, ...</i>	Case errors
17. <i>mit, zusammen mit</i>	Preposition
18. <i>der, meiner, einer, unserer, ...</i>	Case errors
19. <i>würde, hätte, könnte, dürfte, ...</i>	Indicative for subjunctive; vocabulary
20. <i>Herbst, Frühling, Sommer, ...</i>	Inappropriate vocabulary items

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 who afford students more practice in this form of exercise should expect better results on the paragraph completion, since one factor in student performance is familiarity with the task at hand. I do not think teachers will profit by devising cloze passages that test particular points of grammar and vocabulary. What is more important is that teachers provide extensive practice with this form. A reasonable strategy is for teachers to simply remove every eighth or ninth word, regardless of its form, and the next week do another similar exercise.

Composition

What was the intent of this question?

In selecting topics for compositions, the Development Committee looks for areas of relevance and interest to AP students. Topics and subtopics are chosen to allow students to demonstrate a broad range of vocabulary and structure. For higher scores, students needed to write a good answer to the question and show a sustained control of structural features of German. High-scoring compositions normally employed complex sentences linked by cohesive discourse strategies.

This question asked students to consider the factors involved in their choice of careers. They were given a list of six possible factors and asked to explain the importance of any three. The exact wording of the question follows:

Welche von den folgenden Faktoren sind für Sie wichtig, wenn Sie einen Beruf aussuchen?

- *Geld zu verdienen*
- *Spaß bei der Arbeit zu haben*
- *Freizeit zu haben*
- *anderen Menschen zu helfen*
- *kreativ zu sein*
- *Wünsche der Eltern zu erfüllen*

Schreiben Sie über mindestens drei der Faktoren, und erklären Sie, warum diese drei Faktoren für Sie wichtig sind.

How well did students perform on this question?

This question elicited responses that were comparable to responses in recent years. The mean score for the Standard Group was 5.6 out of a possible nine points. (In 2002 the mean score for the Standard Group was 6.17 out of a possible nine points.) The mean score for all students was 6.16 out of a possible nine points.

The weakest students sometimes responded to three of the six subtopics but failed to connect their comments to the overall topic of career choice. Readers could only speculate whether this failure was due to less-than-adequate language skills, carelessness in reading the question, a failure to understand the term *Beruf* (career or profession), or some combination of the three.

Still, there were very few performances that simply missed the mark. Consequently, the scores reflect what students did with what they knew. Students almost without exception had much to discuss, and readers were on the whole satisfied that language samples could be accurately and fairly scored. An important component in the design of the question was the requirement that students provide counterarguments to their own view. This higher-order cognitive task allowed the more advanced students to distinguish themselves.

Readers at the debriefing were generally positive about the question, expressing the conclusion that students were able to relate readily to the context. At the same time they found that the cognitively rather simple question did not elicit many complex compositions. Several commented that last year's more cognitively challenging question led to better performances. The overall scores bear out this view.

What were common student errors or omissions?

The most common omission was the failure to connect the subtopics to the larger theme of calling or career. A parallel discriminator was control of the language.

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 most productive classroom strategy is to conduct frequent in-class writing sessions, evaluated according to the same standards that are used at the AP Reading. These are available from AP Central™ (apcentral.collegeboard.com). To ensure that all AP students are familiar with the assessment scale, many

teachers involve students in grading according to the rubric, either in groups or pairs. Samples from recent exams may be used to train students on the scale of expectations.

Directed Response

Students did well on these items and continued the trend of improved performances with each passing year. The mean score for all six directed responses for the Standard Group was 21.53 out of a possible 30 points. The mean score for all six directed responses for all students was 23.31 out of a possible 30 points.

***Nummer 1.** Du sitzt schon den ganzen Tag am Computer. Warum denn? (You have been at the computer all day. Why is that?)*

What was the intent of this question?

The first prompt is intended to be a relatively simple task and is designed to ease students into this part of the exam. Often a list is acceptable as an answer. In this case, students could have given a list of things they were doing at the computer.

How well did students perform on this question?

This item fulfilled its function of providing students with a low-stress start to the section and they performed well.

What were common student errors or omissions?

Weaker students failed to explain why they were at the computer. They merely discussed their computers. A typical example is, "Mein Computer ist toll!"

***Nummer 2.** Du bist spät zur Arbeit gekommen. Was ist denn passiert? (You have arrived late to work. How did that happen?)*

What was the intent of this question?

This prompt provided an opportunity to elaborate on a past event and allowed students the chance to make up a story.

How well did students perform on this question?

This item provided a greater opportunity to elaborate than did the first. Students who fully comprehended the question in general performed well. The strongest students were able to improvise a detailed excuse and narrate in the past. Almost all were able to make some kind of excuse.

What were common student errors or omissions?

There seemed to be no particular pattern of error or omission.

Nummer 3. *Stell dir vor: du könntest nächste Woche nach Deutschland fliegen. Was wären deine Pläne? (Imagine that you could fly to Germany next week. What would your plans be?)*

What was the intent of this question?

This item provided an opportunity for students to project into the future and show they knew a little bit about Germany.

How well did students perform on this question?

This prompt proved to be a challenge. The less advanced students usually repeated something about going to Germany and listed geographical places, with little or no control over verb tense and mood. The more advanced students often gave details about what they would do in Berlin or Munich, and why, often with control of the subjunctive mood.

What were common student errors or omissions?

Weaker students frequently showed a faulty sense of European geography. Readers were surprised to find the Black Forest and the Danube in the city of Munich, to name but two examples. Geographic innovations did not affect the scores for the prompts in which they occurred, but it was an interesting trend. More advanced students seemed to show, in general, a better grasp of places and site-specific opportunities in Germany.

Nummer 4. *Morgen beginnt der Frühling. Warum gefällt dir diese Jahreszeit? (Tomorrow is the first day of spring. What is it that you like about this season of the year?)*

What was the intent of this question?

As the fourth item in the sequence of directed responses, this prompt represents the Development Committee's best guess at the most challenging item. The prompt offered an opportunity to both describe aspects of the spring season and explain the desirability of each.

How well did students perform on this question?

Student performance was better than expected. Most were able to give a sensible answer.

What were common student errors or omissions?

The least advanced students sometimes failed to understand the term *Frühling* (spring), even mistaking it for *Frühstück* (breakfast), a misunderstanding that was perhaps motivated in part by the accidental juxtaposition of the word *Morgen*.

Nummer 5. *Ich habe gehört, du hast in den Ferien etwas Tolles erlebt. Erzähl doch mal! (I heard you had quite an experience on your holiday. Tell me about it!)*

What was the intent of this question?

This prompt offered an opportunity to narrate in the past. The demands for vocabulary were not particularly demanding and were fairly open ended.

How well did students perform on this question?

Students performed well. Because the prompt was open ended, some candidates did not react as quickly and had to improvise for a few seconds until they thought of something to say. The language with which they filled this time was often both interesting and revealing of their level of language proficiency.

What were common student errors or omissions?

No particular pattern of error or omission was noted.

Nummer 6. Warum musst du denn schon gehen? Wir haben doch gar keine Hausaufgaben! (Why do you have to leave so soon? We don't have any homework!)

What was the intent of this question?

The final item intends to give students a positive conclusion to the section. This item encouraged them to think of some other excuse than the usual one — that they have too much homework.

How well did students perform on this question?

Students performed well on this item, often making another excuse and sometimes disagreeing with the premise and asserting that they did in fact urgently have homework to do.

What were common student errors or omissions?

No pattern was observed.

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 can expect best performances from their students if 1) their students have achieved mechanical mastery of the actual equipment that will be used during the AP Exam, 2) the teachers maximize practice with the form of the exercise in the classroom and lab, and 3) the teachers foster familiarity with the standards of assessment, the rubrics, used at the AP Reading. The essence of the exercise — a spontaneous oral response to an aural prompt — can be used in a variety of classroom settings. Even practice with the entire AP class has some advantages, since students must cope with the pressure to perform in a short time and some may gain confidence by hearing others (“Oh, I can do that!”). Creative teachers may also find ways to practice in small groups and pairs, with and without the application of recording systems. Rubrics for this task are available at AP Central.

Picture Series

What was the intent of this question?

This section is designed to elicit a narration by students using six pictures. Unlike the directed responses, in which spontaneous creativity is sometimes required to come up with answers to the questions posed, this section requires students to tell the story after a period of reflection. The facts of the story are given. This presupposes an ability to name objects in the pictures, describe activities depicted, and use cohesive discourse strategies to form a narrative. The vocabulary needed to narrate the 2003 sequence was almost all relatively high frequency and allowed students to show how they can deal with structure without fumbling for obscure words. The vocabulary needed for Pictures 4 and 5 however, was somewhat more advanced.

How well did students perform on this question?

Because students did not need to reflect much on low frequency vocabulary, they did well on this task. The mean score for the Standard Group was 3.66 out of a possible six points. The mean score for all students was 4.13 out of a possible six points. The richness of familiar detail in the first three pictures allowed students to get rolling with the narration.

What were common student errors or omissions?

There were few problems with vocabulary resources; students could almost always find appropriate resources with which to express the content of the pictures. An exception was finding appropriate vocabulary for vehicular passing and driving fast in the fourth picture and for a traffic jam in the fifth. These challenges provided an opportunity for those who were truly advanced colloquial speakers to shine; for those with less experience in German-speaking countries, describing this key event was an exercise in circumlocution. Making do when one does not have all the words is an important skill in the project of second language acquisition, and many rose to the challenge in creative ways.

The least coherent productions offered listeners no help in connecting individual utterances into a sensible narrative. The lack of time adverbs, gender agreement across picture frames, and logical connectors correlated with the lowest scores.

Students who dramatized the picture series generally gave a less impressive performance than those who narrated. There was improvement in this regard, as AP teachers continue to encourage their students to narrate and avoid an overuse of direct speech for the picture series.

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?

As in the Directed Response section, mechanical mastery of the actual equipment used during the AP Exam will contribute to students' confidence in this exercise. Most important is the students' actual experience producing oral narratives of the prescribed length. Frequency of practice and familiarity with the rubrics will pay large benefits. Additionally, I recommend teachers give specific attention to lexical items and grammatical markers that lend cohesion to narratives.