

Advanced Placement United States Government and Politics

Answering the Free-Response Questions (FRQs)

General Tips

- Read the entire question before you answer (or plan to answer) any one part. Get a feel for what the entire question is about and understand what you are asked to do in each part before you begin to plan your answer. This “big picture” understanding of the question will help you understand each part and will prevent you from duplicating responses.
- Construct a simple chart with two columns and as many rows as necessary. The first column should include what you must do to earn each point (the “tasks” of the question) and the second column should include your planned responses to those tasks. (See below.)
- Spend the first five minutes (of the 25 minutes allotted for each question) to plan your response.
 - Time will not be an issue for most students, so invest the time in planning your answer.
 - If you are asked for two examples of something, try to come up with four examples while planning. Then, select the best two to include in your response.
- Start your response with a very brief introduction or thesis.
 - Even one simple sentence that addresses the general issue of the question will suffice.
- Label, number/letter, and underline to clarify your response.
 - AP readers grade essays quickly. You should do whatever you can to clarify your response and to show that you have addressed each component of the question.
- Be clear in your answer.
 - Do not hide your response in wordy sentences. Be clear and direct in your response.
 - Use “Government vocabulary” and avoid vague language. Instead of “The President can stop something from becoming law...,” write “The President can veto a piece of legislation...”
 - Do not include unnecessary, irrelevant, or vague information that may confuse your response. It is not necessary to include extraneous information or terminology simply to demonstrate your knowledge to the reader; include only information that is germane to the question.
- Answer each “task” of the question: define, identify, and explain how or why.
 - Each “task” earns points. Do not skip any part.
- Answer what is asked even when the answer seems obvious.
 - The purpose of the essay is to demonstrate your knowledge of the topic. Do not think that something is so elemental or obvious that it does not require an explanation.
 - Think of a young child who asks questions about things that we consider obvious. Always hear that child’s voice in your head, asking “why?”
- Answer as much of the question as you can to earn as much credit as possible.
 - While you want to earn all the points on every question, earning some is better than none.
 - One point can be the difference between a 4 and a 5 on the AP exam.
- Avoid “double-dipping.”
 - Do not use the same (or similar) explanation or example in more than one answer.
- Respond in the same order as the question is asked.

Question: <i>What must I do to earn each point?</i>	Response: <i>How will I answer to earn this point?</i>

Primary Question Types (or “Tasks”)

- **Define...**

- State the meaning of the term.
- Be very clear in how you define the term. If asked for a definition, there are usually certain components to the definition that must be included to earn the point. Do not approach this point casually; it should be an easy point to earn if you are careful. Brainstorm ideas first before crafting the complete definition.
- Give an example of the term, even if the question does not ask for an example.

Example Question:

*The framers of the United States Constitution created a federal system. **Define federalism...***

- **Identify/Describe...**

- Select a factor, feature, idea, or concept relevant to the topic and give it a “name.”
 - Usually, a question like this requires you to use vocabulary terms that you know. (For example, two features of the Constitution might be “federalism” and the “separation of powers.”) If so, use the appropriate names for them.
 - Sometimes, though, a question like this requires you to identify a concept or something more abstract that doesn’t have a simple or commonly-understood name. (For example, one advantage of federalism might be that it “allows states to create their own positions on policy questions.”) When asked to identify something more abstract, try to “identify” it in a short phrase using precise language. Avoid saying something like, “One advantage of federalism is like when, you know, the states can kinda do their own thing, like you know, with gay marriage and stuff...”
- After identifying a factor, feature, idea, or concept, briefly describe or explain what it is.

Example Question:

*It has been said, “The Constitution reflects a basic distrust of direct popular government.” **Identify two features of the Constitution** and explain how they show this distrust of popular government.*

- **Explain (how or why)...**

- Give a cause or reason for how or why something occurs and explain it thoroughly.
- *Explain* does NOT mean *describe*. You must always ask yourself, “Explain *what?*” What is it that you are being asked to explain. Usually, the question requires you to explain a process, how or why something occurs or works as it does.
- You may include a real-world (not hypothetical) example in your explanation, but remember that an example, while it may help illustrate your explanation, is NOT a substitute for an explanation.
- It is also necessary to “connect the dots” when you explain. To understand this, consider the example question below. The student must (1) identify a feature of the Constitution that shows distrust of popular government, then (2) describe that feature, then (3) explicitly state how that feature shows distrust of popular government by stating what distrust of popular government means. (See sample response below the question.) Keep explaining until there is clarity.

Example Question:

*It has been said, “The Constitution reflects a basic distrust of direct popular government.” Identify two features of the Constitution and **explain how** they show this distrust of popular government.*

Example Response:

One feature of the Constitution that reflects a distrust of popular government is the Constitution’s original requirement that senators be selected by the state legislatures [identify a feature] as opposed to a direct vote of the people. Prior to the Seventeenth Amendment, senators were selected by state legislatures, thus only indirectly reflecting the will of the people [describe the feature]. Because the Constitution did not initially allow people to have a direct voice in the selection of United States senators, it demonstrates that the Framers did not have complete faith in popular government [explain how it shows distrust by explain what distrust of popular government means].