

Chapter 2  
How to  
Approach  
Free-Response  
Questions

## OVERVIEW OF THE FREE-RESPONSE SECTION

You may be surprised to see the words “free response” at the start of this chapter. No essay? What is a “free response,” anyway? The first thing to be aware of is that this response is hardly free. The College Board wants a very specific type of writing, and it is one that you might not be used to. Forget the idea of crafting a fine piece of writing that convinces the reader of your opinion. Instead, think “just the facts, ma’am.” Your basic goal here is to read the questions and answer them to the best of your ability.

You will have 100 minutes to answer four questions, so be sure to budget your time well. Give as much detail as necessary to answer the question, but no more! Above all, don’t worry. So long as you know the basics of American government, this section should be a breeze.

## WHAT ARE THE FREE-RESPONSE QUESTIONS LIKE?

The AP U.S. Government and Politics free-response section contains four free-response questions. Each counts equally. The entire free-response section counts as 50% of your examination grade. Even though the free responses are all mandatory, you may have some choices within a free-response question. For example, a question may look like this:

1. Procedural due process rights have been expanded since the early 1960s.
  - (a) Define procedural due process and explain why it is important to the American legal system.
  - (b) Explain the difference between procedural due process and substantive due process.
  - (c) Choose two of the following cases and explain how they expanded procedural due process rights.
    - *Mapp v. Ohio*
    - *Gideon v. Wainwright*
    - *Escobedo v. Illinois*
    - *Miranda v. Arizona*

Choices within questions allow you to showcase what you know best, instead of having to write about many subjects, some of which you might not remember as well. Again, depth-not-breadth is the focus here. Think of this as a “data dump” where you can show off your knowledge and “wow” the grader. Note that you will not get a higher score for writing more than what the question requires. You cannot make up points lost in a previous free-response question, so be sure to focus on only the topic that the question asks about. If there is a choice within a question, make certain you choose the subject you know the most about. Be explicit. Also remember that if the question deals with a Supreme Court case, you shouldn’t worry about the background of the case. It is the ruling and the consequences that are important.

If you are confronted with a free-response question that you feel unprepared to answer, don't panic. Skip it and come back to it later. Writing another free-response essay may get your juices flowing and prompt you to recall your knowledge of the first subject. Just remember to keep track of your time so that you have time to return to the question that you skipped.

You cannot be penalized for just *attempting* to write an answer. Therefore, never leave a free-response question blank. Write something about the subject, even if it is just basic knowledge you picked up from a magazine or a website.

The free-response essays are graded using an answer standard, to which only the graders have access. A certain number of points is given for each piece of information supplied correctly. The numerical grade of the essay is determined by adding the points earned for each part of the response.

Each free-response essay uses a different scoring standard. One essay could be graded using a total of five points, another a total of seven points, and another a total of ten points. While the total score for each question may differ, the value of each question is equal in determining the final score on the free-response section. Each of the four free-response questions is worth one-eighth of the total exam, or 12.5%. The highest possible score on the free-response section is 60 points.

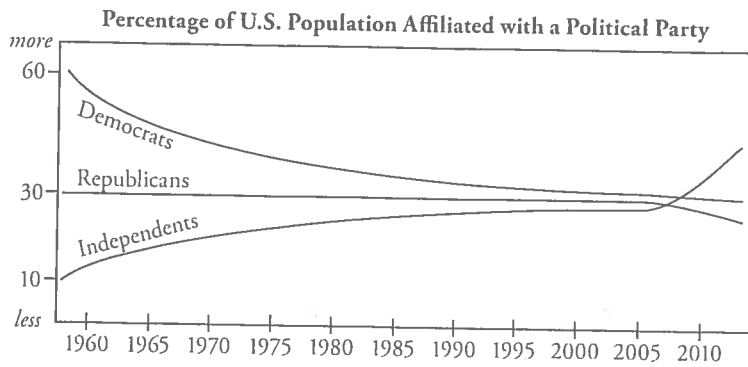
A simple way for you to get an idea of the kinds of questions that might be asked, and the structure of an answer standard, is to visit the College Board website at [www.collegeboard.com](http://www.collegeboard.com). In the section devoted to Advanced Placement, you will find AP U.S. Government and Politics free-response questions from the last five years, with the grading standard for each question. These are extremely helpful. They allow you to acquaint yourself with how the points break down and what the graders are seeking. Be sure to check them out.

Another way to understand the types of questions that may be asked is to look in the table of contents of an AP U.S. Government and Politics textbook. Test writers essentially take the concepts found in a few individual chapters and combine them into a question. For example, they may ask about the ways in which interest groups attempt to influence policy. Information about such a question will be found in the chapters on interest group politics, elections, and the branches of government. The test writers are trying to force you to synthesize (combine, analyze, and evaluate) many separate pieces of information into a coherent point of view. Therefore, the question may be written like this:

1. Interest groups can have both a positive and negative impact on American politics.
  - (a) Describe one positive effect that interest groups have on politics.
  - (b) Describe one negative effect that interest groups have on politics.
  - (c) Choose one of the groups below and identify two methods it uses to affect public policy.
    - NRA
    - AARP
    - AMA
    - NOW

In the free-response section you will not be required to write a complete essay with a thesis statement, evidence, and conclusion: There simply isn't time. This response is an opportunity to showcase your knowledge of U.S. government and politics, not a time to highlight your understanding of proper syntax and your hatred of dangling modifiers. You won't be graded down if you *do* write a thesis statement, evidence, and conclusion, but this practice will waste precious time that you could have spent writing a more complete answer for what they *do* ask of you. **Do exactly the tasks that the question asks of you.** This may seem obvious, but many students get off track and neglect to address all facets of the questions with clear responses. If the question asks you to analyze data by explaining trends shown in a graph, do so. Make sure your analysis can be backed up by the data in the graph. If the graph question contains a Part B (it often does), it will probably ask for an explanation of the data in the graph. This part of the answer will come from your knowledge of the subject. Because time is a factor, and you will be awarded no more points for extras, do nothing more than what the question asks.

See the next page for an example of a stimulus-type free-response question.



2. Using the information in the chart and your knowledge of United States politics, complete the following tasks.
- (a) From the data in the chart, identify two trends that have occurred in the membership of the political parties in the past fifty-five years.
  - (b) Based on your knowledge of American politics, explain what impact the two trends that you identified in Part (a) have had on those running for political office.

Part (a): Answer (Keep in mind that this is just an outline.)

- The data shows that the number of Republicans has remained mostly constant.
- The data shows that the number of Democrats has declined.
- The data shows that the number of Independents has increased, especially in the 2000s.
- The data shows that the two political parties are approximately equal in number.
- The data shows that the Independents have mostly come from the Democratic Party.
- The data shows that there are now more self-described Independents than members of the two major parties.

Part (b): Answer

- Independents are people who belong to no party. They vote for the candidate they like best regardless of the party with whom the candidate is affiliated. Independents are usually upset with one of the parties because of the positions they have taken on particular issues. Independents tend to be centrists. Therefore candidates will try to appeal to Independents by taking centrist positions, because Independents will probably decide the outcome of an election. This often makes it difficult to differentiate the policy positions of candidates. Perhaps this is one reason voters say it doesn't matter who they vote for, which in turn can cause depressed voter turnout.

Note that the question in Part (a) does not ask for a thesis statement. It simply asks you to analyze the data. Part (b) also does not require a thesis statement. It contains an explanation of the data and the impact of decreasing party affiliations on elections. You should now be able to see that the free-response essay on the AP U.S. Government and Politics Exam really is different from an essay that you might write in your normal English or History class: It doesn't stress the importance of a thesis, supporting paragraphs, and conclusion. When answering a free-response question, you simply want to share as much information and as many strong, well-constructed examples as you can think of. Don't stress yourself out worrying about the format and flow. Simply get the information from your brain onto the paper and show the grader that you have a strong grasp of U.S. governmental policies and precedents.

### **Be Optimistic**

Both the exam writers and the graders realize that 25 minutes is not very much time to respond to a question. They understand that it will take about five minutes for you to understand the question and begin to organize your answer. Obviously, there is not enough time to give a very in-depth answer. Because of the time constraints, you will have to choose only those parts of your answer that give the strongest response to the question. The graders are not looking for the final word on the subject. Instead, they are checking to see whether you can

- address the question
- clearly explain the issues involved

These should be your goals in writing your AP U.S. Government and Politics Exam free-response essays.



## **PLANNING AND WRITING YOUR FREE RESPONSE**

There are two essential components to writing a successful timed free response. The first is to plan what you are going to write before you start writing. The second is to use a number of tried-and-true writing techniques that will make your essay better organized, better thought out, and better written.

### **Before You Start Writing**

Read the question carefully and figure out what you are being asked. Then, brainstorm for a minute or two. In your test booklet, write down everything that comes to mind about the subject; there is room on the back pages of the booklet and in the blank space at the bottom of the question pages. Look at your notes and consider the results of your brainstorming session as you decide which points you will

argue in your response. Tailor your argument to the information, but don't make an argument that you know is wrong or with which you disagree. If you do either of these things, your response will probably be awful. Finally, go through the results of your brainstorming. Some of what you wrote down will be "big picture" conclusions, some will be facts that can be used as evidence to support your conclusions, and some will be interesting material that, nonetheless, will not fit into a well-organized free-response essay and should be discarded.

Next, make an outline. The outline should be brief—just a few words for each paragraph. You should plan to write as many paragraphs as are appropriate for answering the question. For example, some free responses will require two paragraphs on relevant issues; others will need five. Sometimes the question or part of the question can be answered with a couple of paragraphs and a bulleted list. If the question does not require a full essay, you should not write one.

## As You Are Writing

Observe the following guidelines:

- **Keep sentences as simple as possible.** Long sentences get convoluted very quickly and will give your graders a headache.
- **Use appropriate political science terminology.** Don't overdo it, however, because it will look as if you're trying to show off. Remember that good writing doesn't have to be complicated; most great ideas can be stated simply. *Never* use a word if you are unsure of its meaning or proper usage. A malapropism may give your graders a good laugh, but it won't earn you any points and will probably cost you a higher score.
- **Write clearly and neatly.** Here's an easy way to put graders in a good mood. Graders look at a lot of chicken scratches; it strains their eyes and makes them grumpy. Also keep in mind that they have as little as two minutes to read each response. Neatly written essays make them happy. When you cross out, do it neatly. Write in blue or black ink. If you're making any major changes—for example, if you want to insert a paragraph in the middle of your response—make sure you indicate them clearly.
- **Define your terms.** Most questions require you to use terms that mean different things to different people. One person's "liberal" is another person's "conservative" and yet another person's "radical." The folks who grade the test want to know what *you* think these terms mean. When you use them, define them. Take particular care to define any such terms that appear in the question. Almost all official College Board materials stress this point, so don't forget: Define any term that you suspect can be defined in more than one way.

- **Use structural indicators to organize your paragraphs.** Another way to clarify your intentions is to organize your response around structural indicators. For example, if you are making a number of related points, number them (“First...Second...Finally...”). If you are attempting to compare and contrast two viewpoints, use the indicators “on the one hand” and “on the other hand” or “whereas.”
- **Stick to your outline.** Unless you get an absolutely brilliant idea while you’re writing, don’t deviate from your outline. If you do, you’ll risk winding up with an incoherent response.
- **Back up your ideas with examples.** Yes, we’ve said it already, but it bears repeating. Don’t just throw ideas out there and hope that you’re right. You will score big points if you substantiate your claims with facts. If you cannot recall real, specific examples, use hypothetical situations to illustrate your point.
- **Try not to write just one or two paragraphs.** A too-short response will hurt you more than will one that is too long.



## HOW TO CRACK THE FREE-RESPONSE QUESTIONS

Answering the free-response questions on the AP U.S. Government and Politics Exam is not very different from answering the essay questions you have been answering all your life. The keys to success are the following:

- **Read the question carefully.** Tailor your answer to the question. When you have written all your notes and your outline, and you are prepared to begin writing your response, reread the question to ensure your answer is right on target.
- **Answer each part of the question directly.** If one part of the question asks how Jefferson’s concern about term limitations is relevant today, you should probably have a sentence in your essay—and in a fairly prominent place such as the first paragraph or the first line in a subsequent paragraph—that reads “Jefferson’s concern is relevant (or irrelevant) today.” Don’t be coy.
- **Don’t panic.** As you scan the four questions, you may well come to rest on the one that deals with a subject your teacher didn’t cover or you didn’t get around to studying. Don’t worry: Everyone finds some questions harder than others. To build your confidence, answer the question you find easiest before turning to the intimidating one.
- **Watch your time.** You need to average no more than 25 minutes per question. The biggest mistake you can make, with the exception of failing to respond to the question, is failing to leave yourself enough time to answer all four questions. It’s okay to spend as much as 30 minutes on a given question, but you’d better make it worthwhile. You also probably don’t want to spend that much time on the first essay or you’ll feel rushed while writing the remaining three.



- **If you draw a total blank on a question, take a deep breath and ask yourself what you do know about the topic.** You may realize that you know more than you think. Try to figure out what the question is asking and/or how you can approach it.
- **If you are running out of time on your fourth free-response question, abbreviate and write partial sentences.** The graders know that you may have to rush to finish the last question. Although, under ideal circumstances, you would write in complete, well-considered sentences, you may not have time to do so. Don't panic: Do the best you can and know that the graders will give you some leeway at the end of your response—especially if you are clear and coherent at the beginning and throughout the middle.