



Student Performance Q&A:

2008 AP[®] Italian Language and Culture Free-Response Questions

The following comments on the 2008 free-response questions for AP[®] Italian Language and Culture were written by the Chief Reader, Frank Nuessel of the University of Louisville in Kentucky. 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.

Writing: Paragraph Completion (Verbs)

What was the intent of this task?

This task assesses the ability to identify and write appropriate verb forms. It consists of a passage that provides a specific context, containing 10 blanks; an infinitive verb in parentheses is given for each blank. Students are allotted 5 minutes total to write the appropriate form of each verb. It is important to read the entire passage carefully and to use the contextual clues in the passage to determine the appropriate verb form. The response for each blank is scored individually and must be completely correct to receive credit; all 10 scores count equally in calculating the total score. Depending on the tense of the verb and whether or not the verb is reflexive, correct answers may contain one to three words.

The 2008–2010 *Italian Language and Culture Course Description* provides an illustrative but not exhaustive list of the verb forms that may be tested in this task; of course, not all of these forms appear in any one passage. Among the verb forms included in this year's passage were indicative and subjunctive verb forms and various tenses, including the present tense, imperfect, *passato prossimo*, past perfect, conditional perfect, future perfect, and the infinitive. The topic of the passage was Silvio Berlusconi's seventieth birthday.

How well did students perform on this task?

This task continued to be challenging for many students. It was accessible, however, and dealt with mainstream subject matter with which students should have been familiar. The mean score

for the Standard Group* was 2.69 out of a possible 10 points. The mean score for the Total Group was 2.98.

What were common student errors or omissions?

Common errors included some of the responses to number 3; students seemed to be unfamiliar with the conjugation of verbs that end in *-orre*. Although students demonstrated more control of the *passato prossimo* (numbers 7, 8, and 9), some common errors included the wrong auxiliary verb or misspellings. Use of the subjunctive continued to be problematic (e.g., numbers 1 and 10). A major source of errors involved incorrect spelling. In previous years the appropriate use of the infinitive proved difficult, but this year many students provided the correct form (number 6, *tenere*).

While some students used acute accents (é) in place of grave accents (è), or vice versa, this was not considered in determining the score. Failure to use accents where necessary, however, was scored as incorrect.

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?

Some of the comments in this section reiterate good practices suggested in the Student Performance Q&A reports for the past two years, yet they bear repeating because they contain important strategies to help students succeed on the AP Italian Language and Culture Exam.

It is wise to refer students to the AP pages in the student section of collegeboard.com, where they can access the Course Description (which includes sample questions) and free-response questions from previous exams with their scoring guidelines. Teachers can also retrieve all of these materials, as well as sample student responses with scoring commentary, from the College Board's Web site for AP teachers, AP Central® (apcentral.collegeboard.com).

Teachers should ensure that students have copies of the scoring guidelines, which explain the criteria for judging responses as correct or incorrect. In a vertically-integrated curriculum (see *The AP Vertical Teams® Guide for World Languages and Cultures* [New York: College Board, 2006]) students should become familiar with the scoring guidelines from their very first year of Italian and each succeeding year until they enroll in the culminating AP Italian course. Moreover, teachers should implement the scoring guidelines in their assessment of student academic performance in the AP Italian course.

Students should always take time to read very carefully the instructions. Before writing an answer in any of the blanks, they should read the entire passage so that they will understand the content and the context. Once they begin to fill in the blanks, they should reread the entire sentence prior to writing an answer. Even though a blank may have more than one acceptable answer, the teacher should instruct students to provide only one answer in order to reduce the possibility for error. Finally, students should proofread their answers in order to ensure that they are the best

* The Standard Group does not include students who speak Italian at home or who have lived for more than one month in a country where Italian is the native language. Decisions on cutoff scores are based on the Standard Group.

possible choices, not only in the context of the sentence but also in the overall context provided by the passage.

Even if the correct answer is identical to the form in parentheses (i.e., an infinitive, as in number 6), the student must write that verb form (infinitive) in the blank. Failure to write anything or writing a statement such as “*non cambia*” or “the same” means that the answer will be scored as incorrect. Additionally, the teacher must remind students not to use the *passato remoto*, as specified in the directions.

The teacher should encourage students to write an “educated guess” in the blank, because this will give students some chance of producing a correct answer; in this part of the exam, no points are deducted for an incorrect response. As always, it is also important that students read for contextual clues in the passage in order to provide correct responses.

Students should place accents directly over the vowel, not next to it or near it. Unclear placement of accents or missing accents make an answer incorrect, even if it is correct in all other respects. Students should write or print clearly. If it is not possible to distinguish an *o* from an *a*, for example, the answer will be scored as incorrect. Other reasons for marking a response as incorrect include incorrect spelling, more than one response, and a response that is not in Italian.

It is helpful for students to have experience with this format. To this end, the AP Italian teacher should seek out authentic texts from a variety of sources, including the Internet, newspapers, magazines, and other print materials. The text should approximate the length of the paragraph-completion samples published on AP Central. These carefully selected, exemplary authentic texts must then be refined so that they contain 10 blank spaces. Preparation of these materials requires judgment and time on the part of the teacher. The teacher should seek a diversity of verb forms (tense, mood, non-finite forms, etc.). (It should be noted that the list of grammatical elements mentioned on page 7 in the Course Description is illustrative and not exhaustive.) These exercises should be timed so that students are writing answers under actual exam conditions. It would also be helpful to prepare additional examples that students could do at home. Over time, an AP Italian teacher will develop a variety of such exercises for use in the classroom and at home.

Based on the errors in this year’s exam, students can benefit from grammatical practice in the following areas:

- Subject–verb agreement
- Review of the use of *avere* and *essere* with the *passato prossimo*
- Review of forms of tenses, especially the subjunctive tenses, with particular attention to the past tenses of the subjunctive
- Review of the rules on how to use the subjunctive and its associated tenses
- Sequencing of tenses
- Irregular verbs
- Correct spelling

Students should be encouraged to read authentic examples of good Italian prose, to see how Italian grammar is expressed in actual usage in comparison to the more artificial presentations often found in textbooks. Although such materials may not be available in some school libraries, certain public libraries and almost all college and university libraries can be expected to have such resources. Teachers can also refer students to appropriate Web sites for examples of well-written

prose. Similarly, teachers may want to reproduce appropriate examples of Italian prose for students to read and review, with special attention paid to the grammatical elements within the context of the passage.

Writing: Paragraph Completion (Non-Verbs)

What was the intent of this task?

This task assesses the ability to identify and correctly write words other than verbs, including prepositions, articles, and pronouns. It consists of a passage that provides a specific context, containing 10 blanks. Students are allotted 5 minutes to write a single appropriate word for each blank. It is important to read the entire passage carefully and to use the contextual clues in the passage to determine the appropriate word. Each of the responses is scored individually and must be completely correct to receive credit; all 10 scores count equally in calculating the total score.

The 2008–2010 *Italian Language and Culture Course Description* provides an illustrative but not exhaustive list of the types of non-verb forms that may be included in this task; of course, not all of these forms appear in any one passage. Among the forms tested in this year’s passage were definite and indefinite articles, simple and articulated prepositions, demonstratives, clitic pronouns (direct object pronoun, reflexive pronoun), and a relative pronoun. The topic of the passage was the National Comics Museum in Lucca.

How well did students perform on this task?

This task continued to be challenging for many students. It was accessible, however, and dealt with mainstream subject matter with which students should have been familiar. The mean score for the Standard Group was 3.14 out of a possible 10 points. The mean score for the Total Group was 3.55.

What were common student errors or omissions?

Common errors included the use of an apostrophe in number 11 (*un’* for *un*) and confusion about the direct object pronoun (*lo* or *la*) in number 14. Number 15 (*dalla*) caused problems because students did not know the gender of *fine*.

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?

See the response to this question in the “Writing: Paragraph Completion (Verbs)” section.

Students should always take time to read very carefully the instructions. Students should write exactly one word in each blank and should not write “*niente*” or the equivalent; if these instructions are not followed, the response will be scored as incorrect.

Students should write or print clearly. If it is not possible to distinguish an *o* from an *a*, for example, the answer will be scored as incorrect. Other reasons for marking a response as incorrect include incorrect placement of an apostrophe, incorrect spelling, more than one response, and a response that is not in Italian.

Based on the errors in this year’s exam, students can benefit from grammatical practice in the following areas:

- Noun–adjective agreement
- Gender of nouns
- Simple prepositions
- Articulated prepositions
- Demonstratives
- Clitic pronouns (direct object pronouns, reflexive pronouns)
- Relative pronouns
- Placement of apostrophe
- Correct spelling

Writing: Composition

What was the intent of this task?

This task assesses the ability to write a formal composition. It consists of a single prompt that identifies a topic, details aspects of the topic to address, and specifies that the response should be justified with some specific examples. Students are allotted 30 minutes to write a composition of about 150 words. The response receives a single holistic score based on the criteria outlined in the task directions.

Students must write a well-organized and coherent composition, as if they were submitting it to an Italian writing contest. The work is evaluated for organization and clarity, range and appropriateness of vocabulary, grammatical accuracy, and spelling.

This year students were asked to describe a period of the year that was particularly meaningful to them when they were little and to recount a particular important episode that took place during that period. Finally, students had to explain whether that period still had the same significance for them.

How well did students perform on this task?

The mean score for the Standard Group was 3.58 out of a possible 9 points, and the mean score for the Total Group was 3.97.

This task had some reasonably good responses from students because it was a topic (personal experience) on which almost everyone could comment. Nevertheless, some were not prepared to write a formal composition with clarity and accuracy, utilizing skills associated with higher levels of performance as specified in the scoring guidelines.

What were common student errors or omissions?

The following are some of the common problems Readers observed in this year’s compositions. Many of these are recurrent problems that require ongoing attention.

- Failure to address the prompt, including its various components, directly and completely
- Failure to use transitional elements within and between paragraphs
- Lack of adjective–noun agreement
- Lack of subject–verb agreement
- Failure to use appropriate tense
- Problems with articulated prepositions
- Lack of rich vocabulary and idioms (frequent repetition of basic and common vocabulary items)
- Failure to use complex structures (subordination: noun clauses, relative clauses, adverbial clauses; comparative and superlative structures; and so forth)
- Use of informal language (students were instructed to write a composition for submission to an Italian writing contest)
- Failure to use the subjunctive where appropriate
- Failure to use accents (students who used acute accents [é] in place of grave accents [è], or vice versa, were not penalized)
- Failure to use appropriate paragraph structure
- Interference from another 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?

Some of the comments in this section reiterate good practices suggested in the Student Performance Q&A report for the past two years, yet they bear repeating because they contain important strategies to help students succeed on the exam.

Students should always take time to read very carefully the instructions on how to respond to the writing composition prompt. They should also spend some time outlining the composition before writing. Teachers should ensure that students have copies of the scoring guidelines for this task, so that they can see the criteria that are applied. Teachers also need to discuss exemplary sample compositions (available on AP Central) so that students will gain a clear idea of what features of these compositions contributed to their high scores.

Periodically, students should write a composition in class under actual exam conditions (30 minutes on a specific topic, following AP Exam instructions). They must develop a sense of how much time it will take to write a 150-word composition. AP Italian teachers can find materials on AP Central (the sample questions in the Course Description and the free-response questions on the AP Italian Language and Culture Exam Page). In addition, the *2006 AP Italian Language and Culture Released Exam* (New York: College Board, 2007) is available for purchase at store.collegeboard.com, and the AP Italian Language and Culture Practice Exam is also available on AP Central in a free, downloadable format for classroom use by all AP Course Audit–authorized teachers. Teachers may also prepare composition prompts that are similar in form to those of the exam for homework.

Finally, students should develop a habit of giving their compositions a final proofreading for common errors involving subject–verb agreement, noun–adjective agreement, use of the subjunctive, placement of accents, spelling mistakes, use of transitional elements, staying on the task of the prompt, appropriate use of paragraphs, and so forth. For this reason, students should be

encouraged to read authentic examples of good Italian prose, as recommended in the commentary for this question in the “Writing: Paragraph Completion (Verbs)” section above.

Culture: Composition (Content and Language)

What was the intent of this task?

This task assesses the ability to write a formal composition on a cultural topic. It consists of a single prompt that identifies a cultural topic, directs the student to select an example of that topic and explain what makes it significant, and specifies that the response should be justified with references to specific cultural information. Students are allotted 30 minutes to write a composition of about 150 words. The response receives two holistic scores—one for content (cultural knowledge) and one for language usage—based on the criteria outlined in the task directions. In calculating the total score, the content score is weighted 80 percent, and the language score is weighted 20 percent.

Students must write a well-organized and coherent composition, as if they were submitting it to an Italian writing contest. The work is evaluated for knowledge of Italian culture, as well as organization and clarity, range and appropriateness of vocabulary, grammatical accuracy, and spelling.

The 2008–2010 *Italian Language and Culture Course Description* lists five general areas from which the composition’s specific topic may be taken (Italian geography [including major cities and regions]; contemporary life in Italy; the arts and sciences; social customs and traditions; and contributions of Italians and Italian Americans to the world). This year students were directed to choose ONE specific region from the 20 regions of Italy, to describe AT LEAST TWO different elements (geography, cuisine, famous people, history, and so forth) that make that region important, and to explain why this is so. Furthermore, it was necessary for students to justify their discussion with AT LEAST ONE cultural reference (film, readings, art, music, and so forth). It was also possible to include personal experiences and classroom discussions in the composition.

How well did students perform on this task?

The content mean score was 4.52 out of a possible 9 points for the Standard Group and 4.81 for the Total Group. The language mean score was 3.30 out of a possible 9 points for the Standard Group and 3.73 for the Total Group. Even though the scoring guidelines for the language dimension of the culture composition are similar to those for the writing composition discussed above, student performance on the language component of the culture composition was lower than their performance on the writing composition task.

Note that although the culture composition mean content score is higher than the mean language score for both the Standard and Total Groups, these two numbers should not be directly compared because they are based on completely separate scoring guidelines. Nevertheless, they do indicate that, on average, students were slightly better able to meet the standards established for the content dimension than for the language dimension of this task.

What were common student errors or omissions?

Common errors and omissions in the compositions included the following:

Content

- Failure to choose a single region (from the 20 possibilities)
- Failure to discuss at least two different aspects that make the region important or to provide an interpretation of these aspects rather than a simple enumeration of factual information
- Failure to present relevant cultural information
- Failure to synthesize cultural information
- Failure to cite a cultural work in support of statements

Language

- Failure to write in paragraph form
- Failure to use transitional elements to connect paragraphs and sentences within paragraphs
- Failure to use formal language (students were instructed to write a composition intended for submission to an Italian writing contest)
- Failure to use varied vocabulary (frequent repetition of certain basic and common vocabulary items)
- Spelling errors
- Failure to use complex structures (subordinate clauses: noun clauses, relative clauses, adverbial clauses; comparative and superlative structures; and so forth)
- Interference from another language
- Failure to use accents where necessary (students who used acute accents [é] in place of grave accents [è], or vice versa, were not penalized; failure to use accents where necessary, however, was considered in the holistic scoring process)

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?

See the response to this question in the “Writing: Composition” section.

Additionally, it is important to remind students that the culture composition will be scored twice—once for content and a second time for language—by two different Readers. For this reason, students should develop a habit of giving their essays a final proofreading that focuses on both of these dimensions of their response. First, they should check for accuracy of the cultural content and interpretation of any facts presented, and they should make sure that they have answered the question completely. Second, they should recheck their composition for errors involving subject–verb agreement, noun–adjective agreement, use of the subjunctive, placement of accents, spelling errors, use of transitional elements, repetition of certain words throughout the essay, appropriate paragraphs, and so forth.

Finally, students should get in the habit of citing cultural references—such as film, literary sources, newspapers, and so forth—in their essays. Being able to do this presupposes that students spend time, likely both in and out of class, identifying, discussing, and interpreting what the information in such cultural products implicitly and explicitly reveals about the culture of Italy. During classroom discussions, it would be helpful for the AP Italian teacher to call students' attention to those times when a segment of a film, an opera, a literary text, a work of art, or a Web site exemplifies a cultural reference; in this way students will become more easily attuned to this notion. In one culture composition this year, for instance, a student made a detailed observation about the dialect of Rome and gave specific examples. Similarly, another student made a cultural reference to a film starring Alberto Sordi (*Un americano a Roma*).

Speaking: Story Narration

What was the intent of this task?

This task assesses the ability to narrate orally an informal story containing a beginning, middle, and end. It consists of a series of pictures that depict a story. The student is allotted 2 minutes to prepare the narration and 2 minutes to tell the story. The response receives a single holistic score based on the criteria outlined in the task directions.

Students must narrate a complete story, based on the pictures, as if they were telling the story to a friend. Scoring is based on the following factors: fluency, ability to narrate, grammatical accuracy, range of vocabulary, pronunciation, and completeness of response.

This year's picture sequence showed a group of four young people preparing to go on a skiing trip. Once at their destination, one of them, obviously inexperienced, is chagrined and somewhat clumsy. However, it is one of the experienced skiers who falls and breaks his skis. In the last panel, two skiers are watching the others from inside the ski lodge.

How well did students perform on this task?

The mean score for the Standard Group was 3.28 out of a possible 6 points, and the mean score for the Total Group was 3.59.

Students were reasonably prepared to meet the standards established for this speaking task, though some did not perform as well as they might have because they failed to provide a narrative with a beginning, middle, and end.

What were common student errors or omissions?

Overall, students at the lower end of the scoring range failed to tell a complete story, failed to use transitional elements, had very limited vocabulary, lacked fluency, displayed interference from another language, and made frequent grammatical errors, even in basic structures. Other common errors or omissions included the following:

- Failure to tell a story with a beginning, middle, and end
- Sequential description of the pictures instead giving of a narrative
- Repetition of certain basic and common vocabulary items

- Very long pauses
- Failure to use transitional elements
- Lack of fluency
- Frequent hesitation
- Interference from another language
- Failure to use complex grammatical structures (subordination: noun clauses, relative clauses, adverbial clauses, and so forth)
- Basic grammatical errors (subject–verb agreement, noun–adjective agreement, inappropriate selection of auxiliary verb in the *passato prossimo*, and so forth)
- Sketchy narrative that lacked detail

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?

Students should always pay careful attention to the exam instructions. Teachers should also ensure that students have copies of the scoring guidelines used to evaluate student responses.

Although students speak in class, they may not have experience in sustained narration, particularly as based on a sequence of pictures. For this reason, they will need to work on this task in class under conditions that are similar to those of the exam. Teachers may obtain sequences of pictures from AP Central, including those from other languages (although any materials from AP Exams in other languages will lack the cultural context embedded in the story narration pictures on the AP Italian Language and Culture Exam). This activity, and all AP Exam questions, should be assigned from the beginning of the year and throughout the entire course. It should be part of a complete set of diverse speaking activities, because all types of oral preparation will enhance students' abilities in this area.

Students tend to describe the pictures instead of narrating an account with a beginning, middle, and end. Prior to beginning the narration, they have 2 minutes to make notes and prepare the story. This is a very important preparatory step to providing a complete oral narrative, and students should practice this aspect of the exam.

It is also very important that students have familiarity with the recording equipment to be used during the exam so that they will be able to use it correctly. Prior to the administration of the exam, all of the equipment should be inspected to make sure that it is working properly. At the Reading some responses were difficult or impossible to score due to recording problems. It is essential that student responses be recorded properly, regardless of whether cassettes or digital recordings are used.

Prior to the exam the teacher should work with school authorities, the AP Coordinator, and the proctor to ensure that there will be no distracting noises while students are recording. Also, students must be seated far enough apart so as not to disturb one another while responding; spacing requirements are detailed in the *AP Coordinator's Manual*.

- Because it is important to ensure that the proctor knows how to administer the speaking section of the exam, it is helpful for the teacher and the proctor to review together the relevant pages in the *AP Coordinator's Manual* and the *AP Examination Instructions* book well in advance of the exam date (both publications are available on AP Central). Common

problems include recording at the wrong speed, recording on the wrong track, and cutting off the student in midresponse.

- Additionally, teachers must impress on their students that stopping and starting their equipment while recording in order to give themselves time to think and formulate an answer is not allowed and will result in scores being cancelled. Students should follow directions and start, pause, or stop the recorder only when told to do so. Proctors should never pause or stop the playing of the master CD.

Speaking: Conversation

What was the intent of this task?

This task assesses the ability to engage in spoken conversation. It consists of a statement identifying an interlocutor and conversation topic, a practice question, and five scored questions. The student is allotted 20 seconds to speak at each turn in the conversation. Each of the five responses receives a holistic score based on the criteria outlined in the task directions; all five scores count equally in calculating the total score.

Students are scored on their ability to respond to each question fully and appropriately, and to express themselves fluently and correctly. Credit is deducted if the answer is too short.

This year's conversation task consisted of a series of exchanges with an Italian music teacher concerning adolescents and music. The first four questions were: Do you and your friends often go to concerts or not? How have your musical tastes changed in recent years? What opportunities are there to listen to music in your city? What would you do in order to organize a concert at your school? Finally, students were instructed to ask the music teacher some questions about music.

How well did students perform on this task?

The mean score for the Standard Group was 16.22 out of a possible 30 points. The mean score for the Total Group was 17.94.

What were common student errors or omissions?

Responses that received lower scores generally exhibited the following characteristics:

- Failure to answer the question completely
- Frequent hesitation
- Failure to use the entire 20 seconds to answer the question completely
- Limited vocabulary and idioms
- Errors in basic grammatical structures, including the appropriate use of the auxiliary verbs *avere* and *essere* with the *passato prossimo*, and subject–verb and noun–adjective agreement
- Interference from another language
- Failure to use complex structures (subordination: noun clauses, relative clauses, adverbial clauses; contrary-to-fact grammatical structures; and so forth)

- Failure to use the appropriate register, especially in question 5, where the student had to address questions directly to the music teacher using an explicitly formal register.

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 is the case with the story narration task, it is important that students work on this exercise throughout the academic year with the equipment that will be used during the actual administration of the exam. They should respond to a series of five prompts, including ones that require them to initiate an exchange, such as by asking a question. Students also need to develop a sense of how to respond in 20 seconds. They should listen carefully to the conversation prompts and say something relevant in response, even if what they say is brief; in that way, they will receive at least some credit for each of the five turns in the conversation, because “*Non lo so,*” silence, responses in English, or a series of paralinguistic utterances such as “ah” or “um” will result in a score of 0.

Students should listen to a wide variety of male and female voices to prepare for this part of the exam. Appropriate clips from various media (film, songs, opera, television, radio) would be useful in and out of the classroom. Students and teachers might find such materials on television and the Internet, as well as at movie rental stores or in public or college and university libraries.

Speaking instruction in the AP Italian classroom should not be focused solely on the conversation task. Rather, a variety of activities should be introduced into the curriculum (e.g., interviews, debates). Students must be able to respond spontaneously to different situations. This will also improve their fluency and confidence in their linguistic abilities. At the same time, instructors need to pay attention to teaching verb tenses, increasing vocabulary, and so forth. As a final note, it should be remembered that student self-correction of an error is always viewed favorably in the scoring of the speaking portions of the exam.

At the Reading, some responses were difficult or, in some instances, impossible to evaluate because of recording problems. It is vital that student responses are recorded properly, regardless of whether cassettes or digital recordings are used. See the bulleted points at the end of the “Speaking: Story Narration” section for more suggestions for improving student recordings.